

Hope in Spite of Faithlessness

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn to our Bible reading now, and this evening, Paul Brennan, one of our ministers, is going to be preaching God's Word to us, and he's going to be finishing off the book of Ezra this evening.

So do grab a Bible. If you don't have one with you, wave your hand. Someone in a lanyard would love to bring one to you, or if you can see one close by, the sides at the back, do grab it and follow along.

We're going to be reading Ezra chapter 9 and 10. So if you're using one of the church visitors' Bibles, you'll find that on page 395. And we're going to read all of Ezra chapter 9 and 10.

Beginning at verse 1. 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 lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

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.

[1 : 3 5] As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. Then 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.

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 am ashamed and blushed 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.

And for our iniquities, we, our kings and our priests, have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, 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 his 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.

[3 : 14] And now, O our 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're 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, our evil deeds for our great guilt, 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 intermurray 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 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 Shekaniah, the son of Jehiel, of the sons 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. Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took an oath. Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohananan, the son of Eliashib, 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 three days. It was the ninth month on the 20th 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.

[6 : 35] 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. 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 is a time of heavy rain, we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this a 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 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 Josiah, the son of Tikva, opposed this, and Meshulam and Shabbathai, the Levite, supported them. Then the returned exiles did sue. Ezra the priest selected men, heads of fathers' houses, according to their fathers' houses, each of them designated by name.

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

[8 : 06] Now, there were found some of the sons of the priests who had married foreign women, Messiah, Eliezer, Jarib, Gedaliah, some of the sons of Jeshua, the son of Josedach, and his brothers.

They pledged themselves to put away their wives, and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt. Of the sons of Imr, Hanani, and Zebediah. Of the sons of Harim, Messiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah. Of the sons of Pasher, Elyonai, Mysiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jehozabad, and Ellassah. Of the Levites, Jehozabad, Shimei, Kaliah, that is, Kalita, Peththathiah, Judah, and Eliezer. Of the singers, Eliashib. Of the gatekeepers, Shalom, Telum, and Uri. And of Israel. Of the sons of Parosh, Ramiah, Iziah, Malkijah, Midgimin, Eliezer, Hashabiah, and Benaiah. The sons of Elam, Mataniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah.

Of the sons of Zatu, Elyonai, Eliashib, Mataniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza. Of the sons of Bebi were Jehonanan, Hananiah, Zabai, and Athlai. Of the sons of Bani were Meshulam, Maluch, Adiah, Jashib, Sheel, and Jeremoth. Of the sons of Pahath-Muab, Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Mysiah, Mataniah, Bezalel, Binwi, and Manasseh. Of the sons of Harem, Eliezer, Eshaijah, Malkijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, Benjamin, Maluch, and Shemariah. Of the sons of Hashim, Mataniah, Matata, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremiah, Manasseh, and Shemaiah. Of the sons of Bani, Madai, Amram, Uel, Benaiah, Badiah, Jelihi, Benaiah, Meramoth, Eliashib, Mataniah, Mataniah, Jasu. Of the sons of

Binwi, Shimei, Shalamiah, Nathan, Adiah, Machnadabai, Shashai, Shariah, Azrael, Shalamiah, Shammariah, Shalom, Amariah, and Jusef. Of the sons of Nebu, Jael, Mathathiah, Zabad, Zabina, Zadai, Joel, and Benaiah. All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even born children. Amen. This is God's words, and we'll return to it shortly.

Well, good evening. Please have those chapters that Josh read for us earlier. Thank you, Josh.

[11 : 10] Ezra 9 and 10. Please have that open in front of us. Now, if Ezra was a modern-day author, pitching his new book about the return of God's people from Babylon to Jerusalem, you can imagine that some of the aspects of that book may well appeal to the publishers. A 900-mile journey over four months by foot with shed loads of gold. Would they be ambushed on the way? The tension, the drama? You can always imagine it. Full of suspense and intrigue.

And you can imagine the publisher asking Ezra, so Ezra, how do you plan to finish the book? What's your conclusion? Well, says Ezra, I envisage a vast crowd of God's people gathering together in the pouring rain with tears running down their cheeks and a ceremony of mass divorce taking place. That's how I envisage the end of my book. You can imagine the publisher's silence.

Now, perhaps that is your sense as we come to the end of this book. What is going on here? This is a pretty tough ending, isn't it? But even though these are in many ways a difficult couple of chapters, there are many questions raised for us which we'll try to deal with. But even though it's tough, there is hope in the midst of the mess. What Ezra encounters here as he returns to Jerusalem is deeply concerning to him. The very future of God's people in Jerusalem is under threat.

It was, through the presence of these mixed religion marriages in their midst, that the very distinctiveness of God's people as God's people was under threat. The very existence of God's people in Jerusalem is at stake. You see, the very issue that got them exiled in the first place has reared its head again. And Ezra is utterly devastated. It is all falling apart again, he thinks.

But difficult though these chapters are, what they show us is a people grappling with their sin, confessing their sin, and repenting of it. What we're left with at the end of this book is a people who take the holiness of God seriously. And when that is the case, when God's people take holiness seriously, there is always hope. Notice a key verse, chapter 10, verse 2.

[14 : 04] Shachaniah speaks to Ezra almost like a spokesman for the people. And 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. That is the great reality these chapters underline for us. There is always, always hope. When God's people mess up in significant ways, there is always a way back. It is hard. It's costly, as we'll see. But there is always a path back from the dark path of sin. It was through this remnant that ultimately, the promised one would come, a savior, the Christ. Even a people like this, who had, in those intervening 60 years between the temple being finished and Ezra arriving there, backslidden to this extent. But even then, there is hope. So we will look at these chapters in three broad sections, looking at the problem identified, the problem confessed, and then the problem dealt with. So number one, chapter 9, verses 1 to 5, sin acknowledged. Sin acknowledged.

Now, part of our uneasiness with chapters like this is our weak grasp of sin. We fail to see the sinfulness of sin. And at the same time, we fail to see the holiness of God.

We are tending towards downplaying our sin and also downplaying the holiness of God. And so if we do that, well, our sin seems like not such a big deal after all. But we need to grasp the seriousness of sin and the holiness of God. Remember who Ezra was. Remember how he was described for us back in chapter 7.

Ezra said, They would attract people in. Because people could see how God's people lived. A light shining.

And he also knew the warnings that God gave to his people way back before they first entered the promised land under Moses' leadership. What had God said then? Well, let me read it to you.

[17 : 00] 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 Gergishites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mighty than yourselves. And when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction.

Then you must devote them to complete destruction. 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 away your sons from following me to serve other gods.

Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them. You shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their asher and burn their carved images with fire.

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession. Out of all the peoples who are on the face of the air.

Those are words from Deuteronomy 7. Ezra knew those words. Ezra knew the history of God's people after those words were first spoken to them.

[18 : 25] How they had failed to heed God's word. It was because of their failure to separate themselves from those who worship false gods that God had brought judgment upon them and sent them into exile.

Had God's people learned the painful lesson of exile? Eighty years earlier, from this point in Ezra, eighty years before, forty thousand had returned from exile, begun to rebuild the temple.

It took twenty years, but it was done. Great rejoicing, a fresh start. What would Ezra find as he returned, sixty years on from the temple being completed? Well, Ezra nine, verse one tells us what he found.

Look with me. After these things have 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 Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

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 land. And in this faithlessness, the hand of the officials and the chief has been foremost.

[19 : 46] Ezra is absolutely devastated. He's utterly crushed by this news.

Look at verse three. He tore his garment. He pulled hair from his head. He sat appalled. See, Ezra knows and loves God.

He knows God is holy. He knows God is a jealous God. God cannot tolerate his people worshipping other gods. I am the Lord, your God.

You shall have no other gods before me. And the key implication of that, which is spelled out by the Lord, is that his people should not enter into marriages with those outside the family of God.

Why? Because what will inevitably happen is that God's people will start to worship the false gods of their spouses. It leads to religious compromise, to idolatry.

[20 : 55] That is why God forbade it. Ezra knew what a disaster this had been in Israel's past. And here he was, full of anticipation, excitement about what God was going to do with the restored temple, the return from exile.

It was an exciting moment. But also a fragile one. They were few in number, really. Tens of thousands.

Small, pretty fragile. And from this people, they were awaiting the Savior, the promised one, the holy seed. And then he gets the news that the very issue that had sent them into exile in the first place had reared its head again.

And even worse, the leadership, it seems, were leading the way. Utterly devastating. But this is actually a key moment.

This is the start of a turning point. Because without the realization of the presence of sin and the seriousness of sin, it will continue unchecked.

[22 : 03] As we saw two weeks ago, Ezra was the right man for the task. What this backslidden church needed was a man who was utterly clear on God's word, a man who loved God's word, and who lived God's word.

Ezra was the right man for the job. And look at the impact his ministry had. His ministry had an immediate impact. He arrives in Jerusalem, and within a few months, the matter is brought to his attention.

Do you notice that, verse 1? The officials approached Ezra with the news. He didn't find out himself. It was brought to him. Seemingly, marriages with those outside the covenant people of God have been going on for some time, but nothing had been done about it.

A blind eye had been turned. But why suddenly is this news coming to Ezra? It's suddenly brought out in the open. Well, that is the impact of a real and vital Bible ministry in a church.

Issues surface. Mess is exposed. That is not a failure of Ezra's ministry. It's the fruit of it. The fact that sin was now being brought out, identified, seen.

[23 : 17] It may feel like failure. And to Ezra, I'm sure it did feel like failure at the time. But the uncovering of unfaithfulness in the people of God is an indication of a vital ministry of God's word at work.

God's word, through Ezra, had exposed the reality of unfaithfulness. And you see, when God's word is unleashed on a church, there can be no hiding.

Sin cannot be hidden away. It will be exposed. And this, although painful, is absolutely necessary. If repentance is going to take place, sin must be exposed and acknowledged.

If it's going to be confessed and then repented of. And the essence of the problem here is a failure of separation. Look again at verse 1. The people of Israel, the priests, the Levites, have not separated themselves.

If God's people then, or today, are not separated from the world, then they will cease to be the people of God.

[24 : 32] They will begin to worship other gods. The specific issue here was marriage. The men of Israel had taken wives from the surrounding nations.

Now, the issue is not one of race, but one of religion. It was possible, probably likely, that people from the surrounding nations had converted.

And now followed the God of Israel. We saw that earlier in Ezra, didn't we? Those from the surrounding nations were now with God's people. They had converted. So, those folk could marry, I assume, if they followed the Lord.

This is a prohibition of marrying people who worshipped other gods. And that is consistent teaching across the whole Bible. Christians should marry Christians.

That is the testimony of the Bible from beginning to end. Now, you may bristle at that. But, you need to ask the question, if this is an issue for you, ask yourself, is that what the Bible teaches?

[25 : 43] And if so, will you submit to it? Our growth groups have been considering this very question in recent weeks as they study 1 Corinthians.

So, we'll not go into all the nuances here. There's not the time. But, as a brief aside, this is, for some, a very real, a very personal, difficult pastoral issue.

Maybe for you right now. Or maybe it's been so in the past. And the question arises, as we look on to chapter 10 and what happens, we ask the question, what does a Christian who is married to a non-Christian, what do they do?

Well, in Ezra, what we see happening is effectively divorce en masse. They put away their foreign wives. As we'll see, this is a very specific circumstance.

What we read here is descriptive, not prescriptive. Remember Bob Files' adage, narrative is not normative. But, the Bible's teaching as a whole is clear.

[26 : 52] If you are a Christian, and you are married to someone who is not a Christian, you are not to divorce them. 1 Corinthians 7 makes that very clear. But, also to say that if you are a Christian here, and you're not yet married, the Bible's question is equally clear.

You are to marry a fellow Christian. Implication, do not start a journey you know you shouldn't finish. Do not start dating someone who does not love and follow the Lord.

Don't do it. And, if you have started on that journey, then the message is that you need to gently, gracefully, end it.

Now, the Bible's teaching in this area is not difficult to understand. But, it's pretty difficult to heed. As God's people over the millennia have demonstrated, again, and again, and again, this is the issue.

So, heed the warning. And, that may be a very hard word for you tonight. Maybe it's particularly personal for you right now. But, remember, as you think about this issue, remember God's goodness and grace.

[28 : 13] Trust His ways. His ways are the best ways. So, trust Him. Now, there's much more we could say. But, we must look on to see what Ezra does.

Now, that he's uncovered the serious issue at the very heart of God's people. The sin has been identified. What happens next? Well, sin is confessed.

Look on to verse 6 to 15 of chapter 9. And, what we have here is Ezra's prayer. And, his prayer is instructive for us as we see him confess the sins of the people before God.

And, it's not easy to read, is it? Ezra charts the story of the faithlessness of God's people. Their constant failure. And, yet, that failure is met by God's grace and restoration.

Look at verse 7. From the days of our fathers to this day, we have been in great guilt. And, for our iniquities, we, our kings and our priests, have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands.

[29 : 23] To the sword, to captivity, to plundering, to utter shame, as it is today. But, now, for a brief moment, favor has been shown by the Lord our God.

Ezra charts their recent history.

How, because of their sin, they have been sent into exile, to captivity. But, also, how God has shown favor. He had brightened their eyes, given reviving in their slavery.

Showing them a way back to Jerusalem to repair the ruins of the temple. God is abounding in mercy. He had shown them grace. He had turned their captivity and led them out, back from Babylon.

But, now, in the face of God's grace, in spite of the clear word of God, they have deliberately transgressed once again.

[30 : 26] Look on to verse 10. And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? Verse 10.

You feel Ezra's pain.

How can we do it? It's the enormity of this. The provocation it represented that weighed so heavily on Ezra.

Here is a returned people. Whom God has sent into exile in punishment for their sins. For these very sins of complicity with these people. Their idolatry, which they've now debased themselves with again.

God, in his great mercy, when he could have left them there, done with them forever, he brought them back again. Gave them another chance. But how have God's people repaid his grace this time?

[32 : 05] Well, by throwing it back in his face. The very sin that sent them into exile in the first place, they enter into again. And Ezra has nothing else to say but end with these words.

Look, end of verse 15. Behold, we are before you in our guilt. Ezra feels and articulates the weight of the sin.

He calls it for what it is. This wasn't a blip. This was a persistent pattern. And there's no minimizing the sin in this prayer.

He sees the offense that sin is in the sight of God. He confesses it. And Ezra didn't marry a foreign wife, did he? And yet he's saying, we have sinned.

There's a corporate confession. This isn't isolated. It affects the whole people of God. That is one of the great dangers of sins like this.

[33 : 15] It's not just an isolated, personal thing. It impacts the whole people. And Ezra confesses it. In all its detail, he hides nothing.

He confesses the sin. And the response Ezra witnesses is astonishing. We look onto chapter 10. We see sin repented of.

Imagine, if you can, the scene that's described for us here. It says, Ezra is praying and weeping that a very great assembly gathers at the house of God in Jerusalem and they weep bitterly.

There's been a corporate realization of the danger of their sin, of the affront it is to God. And now, they move to repent. And note, this repentance emerges from the gathered people.

This was not something imposed by Ezra. A spokesman steps forward. Shachaniah. And he states the issue very straightforwardly and succinctly.

[34 : 21] He lays out a path of repentance. We've 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.

Let it be done according to the law. Arise. For it's your task. And we are with you. Be strong and do it. Now, the decision which Ezra endorses and enables is a radical one, isn't it?

Repentance, in this instance, for these people at this time, was going to be the putting away of their foreign wives. essentially divorce.

And what do we make of that? Well, the Bible is very clear elsewhere, isn't it? God hates divorce. Jesus states very clearly that divorce is only permitted on grounds of sexual immorality.

And the Apostle Paul adds to that the instance where a spouse is abandoned. So whilst God hates divorce, there are clearly limited situations where it can be permitted.

[35 : 39] So then what do we make of what we read here with this decision to put away these foreign wives? Well, several things to say, several things to bear in mind as we consider the situation.

Number one, remember this is a unique historical situation. God's people were in a fragile and vulnerable state. A fairly small group of returned exile, surrounded on every side by nations who worshipped other gods.

Key to their survival as God's people was their set-apartness, their holiness, their separation from these other people and the gods they worshipped. Marrying wives who worshipped other gods was a major issue.

This wasn't a personal, private issue dotted around the place. These marriages with foreign wives had corporate implications for the whole people. It threatened their very existence, which is why God warned so clearly about it before they even entered the land back in Deuteronomy.

So it's a pretty unique situation in the history of God's people. Never before have God's people been so small. Remember also, who is involved here?

[36 : 58] This wasn't a small handful of isolated cases. Leading the way were some of the priests and even some of the sons of Jeshua, the son of Josedach.

Remember from chapter 2, Jeshua, along with Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel, I can never say that, Jeshua was one of the two key leaders leading the people back from exile 80 years before.

And here are some of his sons leading the way, marrying foreign wives. The leadership were at the very center of the scandal.

Remember also the issues that Malachi points to in his book. Now we don't have time to turn to it, but Malachi was prophesying just around these years.

And he identifies the very same issue here that we read about. He sheds further light for us. Listen to what Malachi says. Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign God.

[38 : 09] The Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. So what Malachi is saying there, what seems to be going on, at least in part, is that Jewish men were being faithless to their Jewish wives.

They had been divorcing them and taking new wives from the surrounding people and worshipping foreign gods. I think that gives a bit of light on the severity of what's really going on here.

The wives of their youth, they were disowning. All this to say, this was no small matter. This was no small sin.

It was a sin that struck at the very heart of the holiness of God's people. It was, in contradiction to the express word of God, extremely serious. And serious sin calls for serious repentance, costly repentance.

Now, as I mentioned, what we see here is descriptive, not prescriptive. This is a unique moment in the history of God's people and it's therefore a unique solution.

[39 : 27] It's not a perfect solution either. The sin is messy and repentance is also messy. There is no nice, neat solution to the situation that Ezra finds himself in.

But it does teach us, doesn't it, not only about the seriousness of sin, but it also shows us the cossiness of real repentance. Serious repentance comes from serious convictions.

Serious repentance is not rash. This wasn't flippant. It's clear from the details that this was not entered into lightly or flippantly or carelessly. The solution was radical.

The solution was putting away these wives. And they had to be sure about it. Look at verse 13 of chapter 10.

The people say, 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 a task for one day or for two.

[40 : 33] 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 judges of every city until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us.

So it seems to be the process was this. Those accused of marrying foreign wives would come at an appointed time. They would sit before an appointed group of leaders and with them they would have elders and judges from their own hometown and they would come to present the case, give personal testimony.

The process took months. Looking at the list here, they covered at least 100 cases over three months, roughly two cases a day.

So this was not rushed. Presumably, they wanted to understand the nature of the marriage, whether this spouse really did worship a foreign God or maybe was she converted, which is entirely possible.

They took their time. They investigated each case. And the outcome of all this was that the men listed at the end of chapter 10 put away their wives.

[41 : 53] Now what would become of those women? Well, we're not told, but it's likely they would have returned to their father's house. And the inference I would draw from the fact they took their time examining each case would be to ensure that these women were treated fairly and not left destitute.

I'm inferring that. But we don't really know. So, whichever way you look at it, this is radical, isn't it? The sin was radical.

The repentance is also radical. And what we're left with here at the end of this chapter is hope.

With repentance comes hope. God can use a people who are set aside and consecrated to him. He will not have his people worship false gods.

His people are far too precious for that. The holiness of God's people really matters. And the fact that we might be shocked by these chapters shows us that we do not grasp the holiness of God nor the sinfulness of sin.

[43 : 15] But even when we do sin, even in persistent ways like God's people here in Ezra, even then there is a way back. There is always hope for a people who acknowledge their sin, confess their sin, and repent of it.

Costly though that may be, his people can shine again. And listen to Peter who reminds us of all that's at stake. Let me close with these words from 1 Peter 2.

He says, you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you are not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which war against your soul.

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

[44 : 34] Friends, we must keep constant watch in the church. It wasn't to be long before these very same issues raised their head again, as we'll see in Nehemiah.

And so the question is always, today, will you hear and heed God's word today? Will you be watchful and vigilant today?

will you live distinct from the world, set apart, holy to the Lord today? There's always, always hope for a people, a church, who are prepared to acknowledge sin, confess it, and repent.

Well, let me pray before we close our time together. Amen. Father, forgive us for when we underestimate your love for your people, for your care for your people.

And you know better than we do the devastation that sin can bring in our lives. So, Lord, keep us from being complacent about sin.

[46 : 07] Help us to be vigilant, to be prepared to acknowledge it and confess it, that we may be a people set apart for your glory, that we may shine bright to the surrounding world.

So, Lord, please help us together to heed your warning tonight and to love you above all other gods. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.