

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Ezra 9-10: The Reformation of the People

The book of Ezra has recorded the restoration of the temple – but it's clear from the end of the book that the people themselves also need restoring. And, like any restoration job, that can be painful. If I go along to the dentist because I need a filling, the first thing the dentist does is drill away the decay before he fills the cavity in my tooth. It's *painful*, but I have to go through that pain in order to make sure the tooth doesn't get worse. Or, restoration work on an old house involves lots of hard graft: knocking things in, pulling things down, ripping things out. It takes much longer, and more mess is created in the process; but it has to get worse before it gets better. Restoration is hard work, and sometimes painful. It was so for the people of God in Ezra's time, as recorded in Ezra 9-10, and it might be so for us too in our own day.

1. Report (9:1-2)

The passage begins with a report being brought to Ezra (9:1-2). It's important to understand the *specific* problem being reported here. On the face of it, it looks like an issue of race, but it's not an issue of *race*, it's an issue of *religion*. We need to be clear that the Bible does not forbid racial intermarriage. To take one well-known example, Ruth is from *Moab* and Boaz is from *Israel*, but they marry, and from their union comes King David, from whom eventually comes Jesus! It's not *racial* intermarriage that's at issue here, but *religious* intermarriage. We know that Ruth, even as a Moabitess, had declared her allegiance to Naomi and to the God of Israel (Ruth 1:16-17). Regardless of her race and ethnicity, that's where her heart was.

But that's not the case here. We read (in 9:1) that the people of God have not kept themselves separate from the *detestable practices* of the surrounding peoples. The people should have been a *holy race*, as 9:2 says – unique as a nation, set apart for God – but

the result of these marriages was that their very existence as a distinct people was under threat. At issue was their *unfaithfulness*. That's what we're told at the end of 9:2. In fact, that word 'unfaithful' is repeated a further four times in these chapters as if to underline the point (see 9:4; 10:2, 6, 10).

We know from elsewhere in Scripture that, when the purity of their special relationship with God was at stake, the people of God were forbidden from marrying people from other nations (Deuteronomy 7:1-6). They didn't get it right during the period of the judges (Judges 3:5-6). And Solomon, with all his wisdom, got it wrong too (1 Kings 11:1-8). Ezra 9:1-2 is of a piece with these passages. The nations did not worship the one true God; they worshipped false gods, and they did so in detestable ways, ways which God wanted to protect his people from, but ways which they – in their unfaithfulness – often chose to follow.

2. Response (9:3-15)

How does Ezra respond? 9:3-5 shows us: the tearing of his clothes and plucking of hair indicates great anguish, the way someone in Ezra's culture might respond to death. His falling on his knees shows humiliation, and his spread out hands indicate pleading. It's significant that he doesn't dissociate himself from the people. When he prays (like Moses, Daniel, Paul, and others in Scripture), he identifies with the sin of the people (9:6-7). God had been faithful by allowing a remnant to return from exile, and had put a wall of protection around them (9:8-9). But the people have forsaken God's commands (9:10-12). In fact, Ezra goes on to pray, God is punishing them *less* than their sins deserve (9:13). He doesn't even ask for deliverance or forgiveness, and the prayer ends in desperation (9:14-15). The people were on the verge of repeating the very thing that had sent them into exile all those years ago!

3. Resolution (10:1-44)

So, how is it resolved? Chapter 10 tells us. It begins with a proposal...

(a) The proposal (10:1-8)

A large crowd gathers, with everyone represented (10:1). A proposal is put forward in 10:2-4: Shecaniah recognises the seriousness of what's happened, and yet still holds out hope. He is careful to say that the women and children should be put away 'according to the advice of my lord' (i.e. Ezra) and 'according to the law' (it's possible that he is thinking here of Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Ezra doesn't make a unilateral decision about how to solve the crisis and then force the people to obey. The people are drawn into his mourning, which leads to confession, and others take part in the decision-making process, so that the group ends up owning the proposal (10:5). It's important in the church too, not to make decisions alone. No one person decides for everyone else. No one person has all the answers. No one person's feelings map the feelings of the entire church.

Even when the proposal is made and agreed, Ezra doesn't act immediately. He withdraws to a private room to continue fasting and praying. He does not make any decisions lightly (10:6). Incidentally, this shows us that Ezra's grief is not done for show, for the benefit of the crowd. When he goes into a private room, he doesn't take off his 'unhappy' face; he continues mourning.

A proclamation is then made requiring all the exiles who had married foreign women to come to Jerusalem or risk being put out of the community (10:7-8).

(b) The procedure (10:9-17)

How real 10:9 sounds! All this going on, and then it rains too! Ezra lays out what has to be done (10:10-11). The large number of people and the atrocious weather make instant obedience impractical, so the people ask for the implementation of the demand to be delegated to leaders in various cities (10:12-15). Once again, Ezra is persuaded by a suggestion of a strategy for working out the

details of the plan. The people wanted a fair investigation in which every case would be scrutinised carefully. So, all of them are questioned, on a case by case basis (10:16-17). It was not done hastily; it was not a hatchet job. In fact, it took three months to go through them all. From the list at the end of the chapter (10:18-44), all levels of society were involved – priests, levites, and laity. 111 names are listed in a population of what would have been about 50,000.

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If we're honest, the chapters are difficult and upsetting. Did reformation really need to be this painful? What's the point? Some have taken offence at the events. Doesn't Malachi (in 2:16) say that God hates divorce? Doesn't Paul say in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 that the believing partner shouldn't leave the unbelieving partner? What about the abandoned women and children? Is Ezra completely insensitive to human distress? For these reasons, some have concluded that what Ezra and the people did was wrong or misguided. They remind us that the Bible *records* things in its accounts without necessarily *recommending* those things.

Painful though it is, however, the passage seems to call on its readers to take the matter seriously; it does this partly by recording Ezra's prayer and partly by setting up what the people had done as an act of unfaithfulness. We may be helped to take the passage seriously by taking three things into account – location, location, location...

- Its *historical location*. We need to locate the passage in its place in *history*. When we do that, we can understand that this was a rare situation, maybe even unique, where what is seen as being at stake is nothing less than the survival of the people of God. The exiles had little political power, no army, not even city walls, and a desperate threat called for a drastic remedy. It was horrible, to be sure, but in the circumstances, it was the lesser of two evils. The other evil would be that there would eventually be *no* witness left, *no* light to the nations. So they make a decision to act radically – like cutting off a hand in order to save the body. Jesus showed what drastic

measures might be involved in giving up things for God – cutting off a hand, gouging out an eye (Matthew 5:29-30) – with the challenge that we be every bit as ruthless as the Israelites had to be with anything in our life which would rival God and our exclusive devotion to him.

- Its *literary location*. In other words, we need to place this passage in the rest of Ezra and Nehemiah. When we do that, it reinforces what we've seen about the special, maybe unrepeatable, elements of the particular time and place. But it's also clear that Ezra and Nehemiah are both concerned with the *separation* of the people of God. For instance, in chapter 2, in the long list of people who come back home, some couldn't show that they belonged to Israel (2:59, 62-63). In chapter 4, when some people offered to help build the temple, their help was refused because they didn't truly worship the Lord God (4:1-3). Significantly, in 6:21, when the temple is built and the people celebrate passover, others are allowed to join them; but it is crucial to note on what basis they join in – they had 'separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbours in order to see the Lord, the God of Israel'. This theme of separation continues into Nehemiah.

- Its *biblical location*. We need to reflect on how these chapters should be understood in the light of the rest of Scripture. In the Old Testament, the people of God did take the form of a nation, a particular ethnic group (which is why it's sometimes difficult to separate issues of race from issues of religion). People *were* brought into the people of Israel from the outside, as we have seen in Ezra 6:21. Sometimes they were brought in through marriage: Ruth marries Boaz, Moses marries a Sudanese woman. But with the coming of Jesus, the Spirit of God is poured out on all believers, regardless of race, colour, and ethnicity; everyone – Jew and Gentile – comes to God exactly the same way. So, we recognise that there are changes between Ezra's time and our time.

Even so, Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 7:39 that a Christian widow is free to marry,

but must marry *in the Lord* – because of the trouble and compromise that enters when a believer marries an unbeliever. And he's clear elsewhere (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1) that if you belong to the light, you don't yoke yourself with someone who belongs to the darkness. That certainly applies to marriage, but it could apply to lots of other things too. It's right to draw lines in the sand. Whether that be in relation to other religions in the world (for instance), or whether that be in relation to the powerful homosexual propaganda machine in contemporary culture (for instance), there is a line, and we make it clear we stand on one side of it. We stand with *this* faith, not *that* faith; we stand with *this* sexual ethic, not *that* sexual ethic. As Christians we have an *ultimate* commitment to Christ, and we're careful when other commitments run counter to that.

Of course, we want to be inclusive whenever we can, but sometimes *exclusion* is appropriate. Both Jesus and Paul talk on occasion about *excluding* people from the fellowship for particular reasons – and we need to take that very seriously. Lines in the sand; separation; purity; inclusion and exclusion.

So, we take Ezra 9-10 seriously: we do so by understanding how it addresses a particular problem in its original, historical location; by understanding how the theme of separation is an important one throughout Ezra and Nehemiah; and by understanding the incident in the light of Scripture as a whole.

Above all, we remember (with Ezra in 9:8-9) that when we fail, God is gracious, gives light to our eyes, and relief in our bondage. Restoration might be painful, but the reward is renewed fellowship with God himself.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 29 October 2006