

Ezra: Faith and Action Preacher

Bible Background • EZRA 9-10

Printed Text • EZRA 10:1-12 | Devotional Reading • EZEKIEL 18:25-32

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will CONTRAST the people's need for repentance with their joyful response to God's word, BELIEVE that God's truth is eternal, and GROW in determination to serve God in our community and beyond.

In Focus

The official board of First Church called a congregational meeting to discuss the church's constitution. The constitution was written 150 years ago and did not reflect the changing racial structure of the community that the church served.

Deacon Robinson, the moderator, called the meeting to order. He explained to the congregation that the church's constitution had to be reformed if First Church was to survive. Some of the older members were concerned that changing the constitution would mean changing the purpose and character of First Church. However, what was really at stake was the way the church would do ministry in the 21st century.

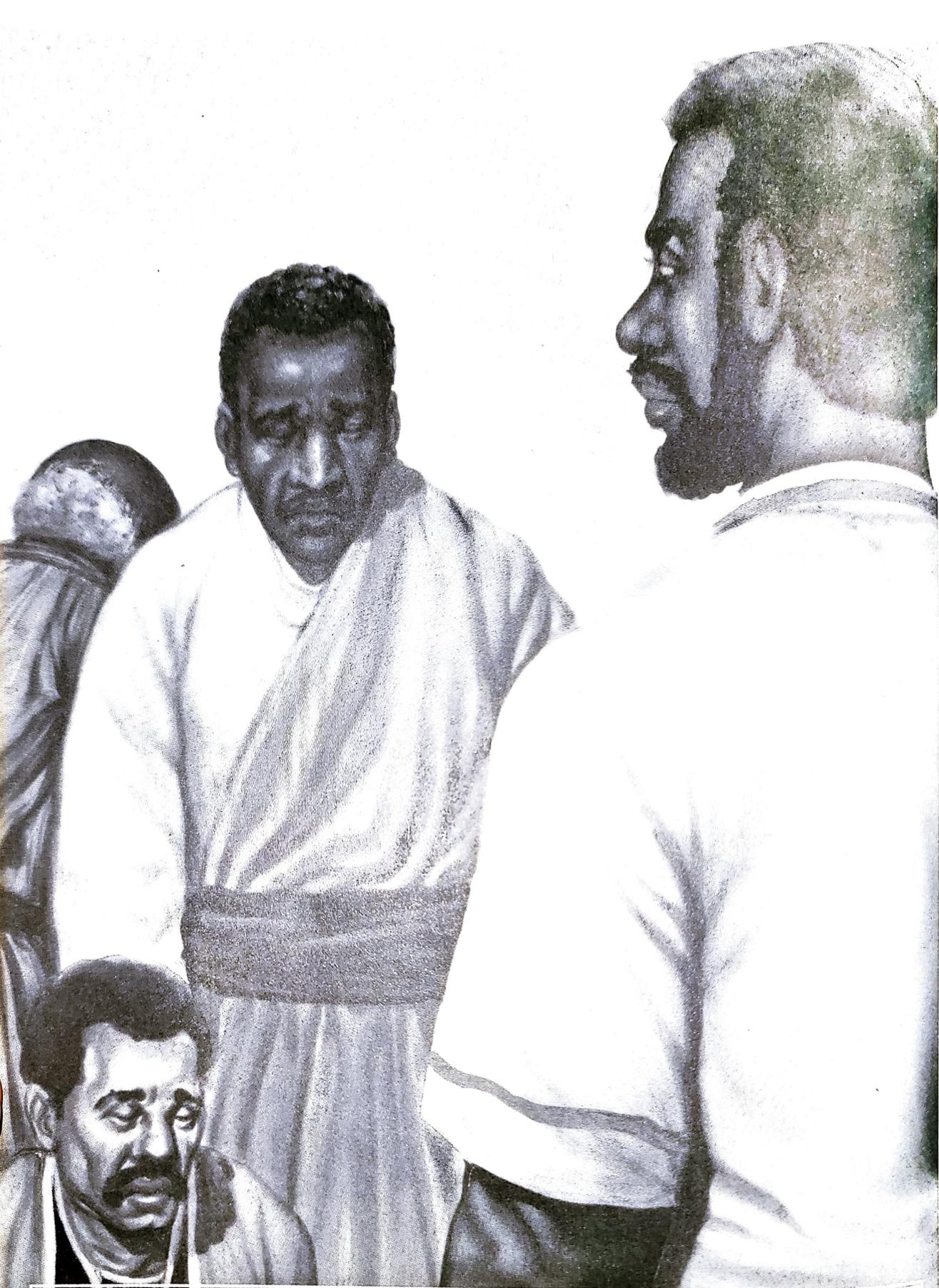
At one point, old Mr. Johnson stood to speak, "I am the longest attending member of this church. I have been here through three pastors. Change can be a scary word for some people. We are creatures of habit, so it is difficult for some of us to accept changes, whether in our worship style or our personal lives. Certainly one of the most frightening times in our lives is when we move to a new apartment or take on a new job. But I have stayed here through many changes, and I can tell you, they have for the most part, been good ones. This church has a good heart, and we want to follow God. His rules aren't going to change. So maybe ours should."

After three hours of intense discussion and mixed emotions, the congregation gave the board the okay to proceed with rewriting the constitution.

This week we will study God's call through Ezra for the nation Israel to change their lives through religious and moral reform. What are some ways God is guiding you to better walk in obedience to His will?

Keep in Mind

"And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed ... to increase the trespass of Israel. Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land"
(from Ezra 10:10-11, KJV).



“Then Ezra the priest stood and said to them: ‘You have committed a terrible sin... You have increased Israel’s guilt. So now confess your sin to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do what he demands. Separate yourselves from the people of the land’”
(from Ezra 10:10–11, NLT).

Focal Verses

KJV **Ezra 10:1** Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.

2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.

3 Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

4 Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.

5 Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware.

6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

7 And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem;

8 And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated

NLT **Ezra 10:1** While Ezra prayed and made this confession, weeping and lying face down on the ground in front of the Temple of God, a very large crowd of people from Israel—men, women, and children—gathered and wept bitterly with him.

2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, a descendant of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God, for we have married these pagan women of the land. But in spite of this there is hope for Israel.

3 Let us now make a covenant with our God to divorce our pagan wives and to send them away with their children. We will follow the advice given by you and by the others who respect the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law of God.

4 Get up, for it is your duty to tell us how to proceed in setting things straight. We are behind you, so be strong and take action.”

5 So Ezra stood up and demanded that the leaders of the priests and the Levites and all the people of Israel swear that they would do as Shecaniah had said. And they all swore a solemn oath.

6 Then Ezra left the front of the Temple of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. He spent the night there without eating or drinking anything. He was still in mourning because of the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.

7 Then a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem that all the exiles should come to Jerusalem.

8 Those who failed to come within three days would, if the leaders and elders so decided, forfeit all their property and be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

9 Within three days, all the people of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. This took place on December 19, and all the people

from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain.

10 And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel.

11 Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

12 Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.

were sitting in the square before the Temple of God. They were trembling both because of the seriousness of the matter and because it was raining.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood and said to them: "You have committed a terrible sin. By marrying pagan women, you have increased Israel's guilt.

11 So now confess your sin to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do what he demands. Separate yourselves from the people of the land and from these pagan women."

12 Then the whole assembly raised their voices and answered, "Yes, you are right; we must do as you say!"

The People, Places, and Times

Mourning. The ancient Hebrews placed a greater emphasis on external, symbolic acts of mourning than modern Western people do. Upon receipt of bad news or in the presence of sudden calamity it was customary to rend the clothes (2 Samuel 1:2) and to sprinkle dirt or ashes upon the head (Joshua 7:6). Hair cloth, which is scratchy and cheap, was adopted as clothing (Isaiah 22:12). Covering the head or lips also indicated mourning (Jeremiah 13:3; Ezekiel 24:17, 22).

A death in the household set in motion an elaborate ceremony of mourning which lasted a week or more. Family members and their friends gathered around the corpse and indulged in lamentations bordering on hysteria. Professional mourners were often called in for a funeral (Jeremiah 9:17–22; Amos 5:16; Matthew 9:23). In earlier times these were probably to protect the living from the spirits

of the departed, who were greatly feared. By Bible times, however, the professional mourning women were used merely as another manifestation of grief for the departed.

How do you make space to mourn? Why is mourning necessary?

Background

For decades, God sent many prophets to warn Israel and Judah that their disobedience and lack of repentance would ultimately lead to their destruction. These prophecies were fulfilled when Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BC, followed by Judah's fall in 586 BC at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. It was then that the Temple was destroyed.

However, the Lord did not leave them without hope, promising the return of a remnant of the people, and rebuilding of the Temple (Jeremiah 27:22). This fulfillment began in 538 BC when Zerubbabel led the first group to Jerusalem

to start rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 1–6). The priest, Ezra, led a second group's return. Both returns were authorized and aided by unlikely sources—the kings of Persia, who had conquered Babylon. In this passage, we see Ezra addressing the people who appear to be heading down a similar sinful path as their forefathers. His focus becomes to lead the people to not only a physical return but a spiritual return of their hearts toward the one true God.

Where do you see God at work in your life calling you back to Him and rebuilding your faith?

At-A-Glance

1. The Proposal (Ezra 10:1–4)
2. The Oath (vv. 5–6)
3. The Proclamation (vv. 7–8)
4. The Affirmation (vv. 9–12)

In Depth

1. The Proposal (Ezra 10:1–4)

In chapter 9, several leaders brought to Ezra's attention that some of the men had married pagan women and reproduced with them. Ezra's response was one of lament. God had faithfully delivered them from the seventy years in exile as promised, and here they were, seemingly determined to return to the evil that led to their destruction.

As was ancient Jewish custom, Ezra tore his clothes, then plucked the hair from his head and beard, fasted, prayed, confessed, and wept loudly as a public expression of his grief and astonishment.

Such a public outcry compelled others to join him. Shechaniah was moved to publicly confess, on behalf of the community, a sin that he did not commit (his name is not on the list in 10:18–43). It is possible, however, that his disdain and grief were still personal, as he may

have been related to one of the offenders. He is identified as the “son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam,” and there is a Jehiel listed among the sons of Elam who defied God's law.

Shechaniah's response was filled with hope, support, and admonishment as he proposed a covenant with the Lord—the utmost binding form of commitment. His solution to send away those wives who still worshiped pagan gods, along with their children, was a difficult one to execute but revealed his commitment to holiness, and the law of God.

2. The Oath (vv. 5–6)

Shechaniah's admonition, “Be of good courage, and do it,” was reminiscent of God's command to Joshua as he prepared to lead Israel into the promised land after forty years of wandering, due to their fathers' lack of faith (Joshua 1:6). Generations later, Ezra was now tasked with spiritually leading a remnant of exiled Jews back to the Lord. His call of repentance meant all of Israel would have to swear to keep their promise, under the threat of severe punishment. Twice it is mentioned he “arose,” indicating Ezra continued to bow before the Lord in mourning.

Even after Israel swore an oath, he did not celebrate—he returned to the room of the high priest's grandson to resume fasting and mourning because of “the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles” (NLT). This is the way in our lives too sometimes. Even after we realize our mistake and determine to correct it, the guilt and shame of the mistake still need to be atoned for.

3. The Proclamation (vv. 7–8)

Each decision led to another with a broader scope. Shechaniah's proposal to Ezra led to the oath taken by the leaders and those gathered locally. Now a proclamation was sent requiring all of the returned exiles in Judah to come to Jerusalem. A timeline of three days was given

as those furthest away from Jerusalem would be no more than 50 miles away—or three days’ journey. Failure to come would lead to expulsion and confiscation of property, essentially a stripping away of legal rights. Ezra was granted this authority by King Artaxerxes (7:25–26). Ezra knows giving up a wife and her children is a major decision, and some would hesitate to do it. He is insistent on faithfully keeping God’s law, though. If these men do not agree to keep the entire law, they will not be permitted to remain under that law. They will be excluded from the community (by being separated from the congregation) and from the inheritance (by forfeiting their property, especially their land).

4. The Affirmation (vv. 9–12)

As commanded, the people gathered after three days, despite the cold December weather. Ezra records the day as “the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month” (v. 9). This is Kislev 20 on the Jewish calendar, which begins in the spring, placing their ninth month in the winter, rather than the fall. Because the Jewish calendar is lunar, dates sometimes vary from year to year compared to the common Western solar calendar. However, since we can pin Ezra’s account to a specific year in King Cyrus’ reign, scholars can calculate the date of this particular Kislev 20 as December 19 on our Gregorian calendar (see NLT, v. 9).

The combination of the fear of God’s wrath, and being drenched and cold caused them to tremble. Under these circumstances, Ezra boldly confronted their unfaithfulness and called for their confession and action. The whole assembly agreed. Since it was rainy season (November-March) and the assembly was rather large, it would take three months for all marriages to be investigated. In the end, 113 men (including several priests and Levites) were found guilty of ungodly marriages (vv. 18–43).

Search the Scriptures

1. When did God first forbid Israelites to intermarry and why (Deuteronomy 7:1–6)?
2. Whose idea is it to divorce pagan wives and send them away (Ezra 10:3)?

Discuss the Meaning

It has been said that we do not sin in isolation, which means our individual sin can have communal negative consequences. These consequences can still exist even amid repentance.

1. Who are the people immediately affected by some Israelite men’s sin, and their subsequent repentance (Ezra 10: 3, 11, 44)? Discuss how this potentially impacted them.
2. How do Ezra’s and Shechaniah’s responses to hearing of the sin demonstrate their understanding of this reality?

Liberating Lesson

It is tempting to judge Israel when reading about their cycle of sin, judgment, and repentance. They never quite seem to get it right. Israel’s story is our story. Like Israel, we do not sin in isolation; the actions of a few can have dire consequences for the masses. Like Israel, we may often find ourselves in a constant cycle of sin. However, our individualistic approach to holiness hinders us. Our pride prevents us from publicly confessing our sin to one another, therefore, rarely do we see examples of a body or individual willingly confessing the sins of others. Yet Scripture shows that such actions please God, often bringing Israel to a place of healing, true repentance, and restoration.

Application for Activation

When confronted with the magnitude of their sin, the returned exiles took repentance seriously, even though the corrective action would be costly. They had tasted God’s faithfulness. He kept His promise to allow them

to return. Their reasonable act of service would be to worship the one true God.

Consider your own life. Where have you seen God's faithfulness, grace, and mercy? What sin has He revealed to you lately that requires your attention and repentance? What will the corrective action cost you? Spend time in prayer—mourning, bowing, worshiping, fasting if necessary. Then, "Get up, be strong and take action."

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ezra 10:1-12

1 Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.

After the return from exile, Ezra made two significant reforms: the reading of the law in

Nehemiah 7-10 and the resolution of mixed marriages in this passage. Informed by the leaders about the issue of marriage with foreign wives, Ezra is in great distress for the sin of people and he expresses his complete displeasure on the matter by a fast (9:1-3). During evening sacrifice time which is around 3 p.m., he falls prostrate and delivers a prayer of confession in front of the Temple for all to see. And indeed, his posture brings the whole community (men, women, and children) around to witness what was going on.

Ezra's act of contrition is portrayed by four elements: prayer, confession, weeping, and throwing himself to the ground. The weeping shows Ezra's contrition for the nation's sin, and by throwing himself on the ground, he showed his abject humility before God. Stirred by the example of humility and contrition of Ezra, the crowd also joins in weeping. They weep even more deeply than Ezra. Ezra's example leads them to realize the seriousness of the sin they have committed. Confession is the first step toward reconciliation with God after a sin is committed. Ezra could confess the sin of the people but a more precise decision needed to be taken to demonstrate to God that the remorse of the people is sincere.

2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.

There is not much background information on Shecaniah, because there are six different individuals with this name mentioned in Ezra—Nehemiah. It is possible either he or his father was married to a foreign woman, in which case, his role as spokesman is understandable because he would have an interest to the resolution of the case. His speech