

Repentance: *The "What now?" After Confessing Sin* Ezra 10

Introduction: What do we do now, after we have sinned and confessed it? How do we move forward? These are questions WE ALL MUST answer at some point because we all must account for our sin, and do so regularly. We do not often talk politics from the pulpit, and I'm really looking to change that, but this last week we saw two professed believers in politics deal with sinful accusations against them in Roy Moore (a nominee for a Senate seat in Alabama) and Dan Johnson (a pastor and state representative in Kentucky). Now, I do not know either man nor do I have absolute knowledge of their situations, but each was accused of similar sinful activity - sexual sin against minors. These kinds of accusations are coming out fast and furiously, and our national culture is reaping the results of sexual practice and expectation without any moral guidelines, and now people are realizing this is destructive and unsustainable. We know that this is a result of moving away from God's clear command, that all sexual activity is reserved and sanctified within the construct of marriage, and ANY & ALL other outside of marriage is sin.

Roy Moore has taken the tact to deny allegations and admit nothing, seeking to move forward. In interviews with supporters, one stated "even if he did these things, I can forgive and move forward". Is that how forgiveness works? Is this how repentance works? Dan Johnson was accused of drunken sexual sin against one of his daughters friends, and decided to commit suicide on December 13. Is this the only recourse when sin is discovered? Is there no hope for a sinner when sin is exposed?

What now? What do we do when sin is exposed and revealed? What we will see today in Ezra 10 is a nation willing to acknowledge their sin, confess it, and work through a process to turn from that sin. It was going to be difficult but possible. It would require a high cost, but not higher than what Jesus Himself already paid. One of my (growing) favorite Christmas passages is appropriate this morning "*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through **death** he might **destroy** the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and **deliver** all those who through **fear of death** were subject to **lifelong slavery**."* (Hebrews 2:14-15) Christ died to **destroy & deliver** us from the power that sin had, so we are not longer slaves to sin but can now freely receive joy and peace. His grace is given to us to call us to admit, confess, and turn from our sin because Christ has paid it all and unlocked our shackles of sin.

Coming to Grips with Sin (1-6; 18-44)

Ezra 10:1-6 While Ezra prayed and **made confession**, 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. ² And **Shecaniah** 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. ³ 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. ⁴ Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it." ⁵ Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath. ⁶ Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan 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.

Conviction (1)

Last week we left a leader in despair. After four months of teaching Scripture and investigating the situation in Jerusalem the fundamental issue became apparent. There was clear violation of God's command to forsake intermarriage among other nations and religions (Deut. 7:1-6), and as a result of this shocking information, Ezra threw himself down on the ground, fasted, and prayed a prayer of confession for the whole nation (Ezra 9:5-15). He did not preach at, confront, or yell at the people, but simply laid out the case before the Lord.

An amazing thing began to happen: *the people began to respond to their leader and respond to the clarity of God's Word.* They began to publically weep bitterly. This is often the only right and appropriate response to revealed sin that has been covered up or suppressed. True weeping is our bodies natural response to a true sense of responsibility and remorse. James 4 even talks about weeping in terms of dealing with our sin:

James 4:8-10 *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

When was the last time you wept over your sin? When was your body moved by emotion over the conviction and realization that we have fallen short of God's glory?

Confession (2)

This corporate response revealed a leader among the people – Shecaniah, who addressed Ezra on behalf of the people. There are several key principles in his confession:

He confessed on behalf of the nation – As a good leader, he was willing to take responsibility for the sin of the nation, which included all the families implicated. Remember, good leadership always accepts responsibility and deflects praise (making sure not to reverse these two).

He confessed on behalf of his family – Shecaniah is described as the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam. We usually do not think much of this kind of family lineage information, but if we look at the list of those who were publically identified as the violators, we see in 10:26 that **Jehiel**, his father was one of those who took a foreign wife. This is out of order of responsibility, but every so often this has to take place where the younger takes responsibility for and calls the older to confess.

He infused hope in the midst of confession – This is really the message of repentance! There is hope. In spite of our sin, in spite of our faithlessness, in spite of our failure, we cling to God who forgives and accepts us based on the atoning work of Christ on the cross, not our own. As the last R.C Sproul said, *"We are secure, not because we hold tightly to Jesus, but because He holds tightly to us."* When we are confronted with our sin, confess, and even face the consequences, we know that we can be **restored to full relationship with God, with the restoration of joy and gladness.** This is the hope we carry in the midst of confession and repentance.

Covenant (3-6)

This led to a decision point, a covenant between the people and God. This was more than a verbal contract that costs next to nothing to get out of. This was a binding arrangement that would require tearing apart if broken. Notice that in making and keeping this covenant, it required:

Fearfully according to God's Law – This is the fundamental issue missing so often in American Christianity: we say we believe the Bible, but then refuse to do what it says. Shecaniah said that conviction came through the counsel of Ezra, but the response was to **what the Word actually said!**

This was not responding to the whims of a leader or the particular force of a cult of personality, this was a convictional response to the call of God in His Word.

Courageously – This was going to take hard work and was going to be by nature HARD. Its interesting that the wording used here is similar to that of Joshua 1:9, where courage was called for in taking over the land of Canaan militarily. This is usually the realm we think of in terms of courage. But here, it was a call to courageous acknowledgement of sin, failure, and repentance. That is the mark of a truly brave, mature, and wise leader.

Collectively – Ezra wisely gathered the leaders to join him because this task was daunting. Leaders do not do things alone but leave room for other leaders to join.

Humbly – Humility can be faked outwardly, but a truly humble leader will be broken over sin – whether his own or those he is leading. Ezra once again sought the Lord while fasting and praying before addressing the people collectively. Who we are when we are alone before God is our true self, nothing else. The immensity of the sin around him caused Him to cry out to God, not decry against the people, so that he could walk them through a process of repentance.

Calling to Action (7-11)

Ezra 10:7-11 And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem,⁸ 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.⁹ 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.**¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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."

The Stakes (7-8)

After the decision made by the leaders of the tribes and Ezra, a proclamation went out throughout the returned exiles. It took three days for everyone to gather, which means not only was this an important meeting (no stalling or anything else trumping it), but it also shows the people were still geographically close to Jerusalem after all these years. This community mixed parts of government and religious practice, so the consequences of failing to show up were immense. It was simply **forfeiture of property and banishment**. Not only would they renounce rights to their homes, but also would be renounced from the religious and civil community, leaving them free agents in a strange and foreign land, cut off from God's promise and people. This seems extreme, but extreme circumstances require extreme measures, and the people got the message.

The Misery (9)

The scene of the people gathering publically to have their sin acknowledged is poignant. This is one time where the weather fit the occasion. It was late in the year during the rainy season, where Jerusalem receives heavy rain (I've experienced this first hand when studying outside of Jerusalem - the sky dumps water in sheets, and it is torrential and happens quickly). The people are gathered outside in the rain, drenched to the bone, trembling because of the cold. This trembling was matched by the fact that they were there to talk about their sin.

The Call to A.C.T (10-11)

Ezra got up to address the people and called them to ACT. It is imperative that we see this all of Ezra as **descriptive** rather than **prescriptive**, meaning we glean principles to think through and insights into God's character, but NOT one for on application. But this process of repentance is similar to what we see in Ephesians 4:17-32 and Colossians 3:1-17 (Redirect - Renew - Replace sin with a pursuit of God's glory rather than our own fleshly desires). So we see Biblical consistency in dealing with our sin.

A DMIT/ACKNOWLEDGE - Ezra first states the case: intermarriage had clearly violated God's Law and increased the guilt of the nation. This is an important starting point in repentance since we must understand the sin we are turning from and the sin that falls short of God's glory. Two important reminders in dealing with our sin: 1) We cannot go above what stands written (2 Cor. 4:6), meaning we are not to make stuff up that the Bible does not speak to; 2) We must remember sin has to do with our heart, motives, intentions, actions, thoughts, and desires, not simply the things we **do**. This means that dealing with our sin is an ongoing, hard, joyful process. Publically here, there was true Biblical violation that issued from a heart drifted from God.

C ONFESS - So Ezra calls for public, corporate confession. This moves from personal acknowledgment to public profession. This is when it gets real. We do not often practice this, for good reason. But in almost all counseling situations we are directed to confess our sins upward and outward, to God first and then to those we have offended. Here the confession was "to the LORD", but in the presence of all the nation. This meant there was no going back (in a good way).

T URN - This is where this process gets really difficult. The call of repentance was a call of separation, turning around from the binding in marriage and cultural magnetization to removing both. Practically this meant there would be a "separation from foreign wives". Yikes. This meant a dissolution of marriages and unions, possibly of business partners and teams. Now we must understand a large disclaimer in context. This is NEVER the call to the church. Those believers married to unbelievers are to STAY in the marriage (1 Cor. 7:12; 1 Pet. 3:1-2). The only time separation is approved is when the unbelieving spouse wants out, they are ok to go (1 Cor. 7:15). So this is not the application for us, but the fact that repentance means change and turning away is clearly what we see here. So a few principles to consider:

Brutal? Yes Necessary? Yes - There is no way of getting around this brutal reality. Even though God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), He is determined to uphold His glory even more. We looked a few weeks ago at King Solomon's life and how foreign wives turned his heart away from God continually (1 Kings. 11:1-8). The problem that all humanity has is NOT overreacting to sin, but under-reacting to the severity and seriousness of sin.

How many? Here is what is interesting. There were 111 families represented that had intermarried - including 17 priests (a larger percentage than other trades), 6 Levites and even a singer. In some ways this is a large number, but relatively small compared to the 10's of thousands of people living in the land. Perhaps this was a representative list, but more likely this WAS the list of all the violators whose names were spoken publically. Was this a big overreaction? Did this have to be such a public thing? Was this an important enough issue to make dignified families of the community into a public spectacle? The answer: **absolutely**

1 Corinthians 5:6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

Galatians 5:9 A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

Sin never stays isolated, in our own hearts or the community. Sin will permeate like yeast if it is not dealt with. When the priests and Levites began practicing sinfully, how could they call out anyone else's sin? The community of individuals had to turn and separate if they were truly going to be reconciled to God, which is always our hope.

Creating the Redemptive Path (12-17)

Ezra 10:12 Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, "**It is so**; we must do as you have said.¹³ 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.**¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.¹⁶ 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. On the first day of the tenth month they **sat down to examine the matter**;¹⁷ and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.

Definite Decision of Majority (12)

But the story does not end here, and we are so glad. There was a definite decision made by the people, collectively agreeing "**It is so; we must do as you have said.**" This decision means we have a desire to be reconciled with God, desire to change, and a desire to repent. ONLY GOD CAN GIVE THIS DESIRE (2 Timothy 2:25) to repent, but when He does, we can respond by faith to move toward real change. But does it happen automatically? How do we move forward when our sin has been so immense and affected so many? **Forgiveness happens automatically, but moving away from sin and rebuilding relationships take time.**

Complexity of Detangling (13-15)

There is great wisdom shown here. The leaders acknowledged the need and desire to change, but also that they were still standing in the rain! The immensity of the sin required an invasive process to change. There were **three wise decisions** made since the GOAL was restoration, not vindictive discipline. 1) They took time to make sure they acted wisely, not impulsively 2) They appointed leaders to help them, knowing the process was too big for just one man 3) They did not stop even when some disagreed with the process (note that "Meshullam" was part of the opposition, but he was most likely part of the violators - Ezra 10:29).

The GOAL was not to publically shame but to see reconciliation and restoration. This often takes time and collective wisdom. Sin creates tangles, like those Christmas lights put away every year. Often walking back toward reconciliation is a **messy process**, because sin messes everything up. Trying to figure out how to move forward after infidelity, breaking of trust, lying, breaking the law and how to begin to trust, submit, and follow again is HARD. But its possible!

Examination over Time (16-17)

The narrative ends with the nation taking **3 months** to examine each case (which would have been about 3 cases a day on a normal work week cycle). This informs us of some key principles concerning confession and repentance. **1)** Since we are all unique and every situation is unique, it takes time to discern and understand the nuances of each situation. Even though there are similarities and patterns of consequences to sin, each one is different based on all the factors involved. **2)** To truly help people

move toward repentance, there has to be a desire to know them and the situation, meaning a time of listening, examination, and prayer. 3) In the church, we are not called to do this process alone. We need those outside of ourselves to give wise, objective, and outside counsel.

Repentance as a practice is based on repentance at salvation - Repentance is a gift of faith and central to the gospel. It separates a faith that is in word alone that even demons possess (James 2) to one that turns from sin to God, from self-authority to understanding Jesus' lordship in our life. Repentance at the point of salvation guarantees that we will continue to repent of sin as part of our life, knowing that even though the penalty and power of sin has been broken, the presence of sin in our life still looms.

Repentance is THE safe space - This means that far from being something negative, repentance before God is the safest place we could be. If we value God's glory over our own reputation, comfort, and will, we will move **toward God in repentance** rather than away from Him in hiding our sin or holding onto it.

Repentance is DIFFICULT - but the result is joy and peace - Let's not mince words. Untangling sin in our heart and life is NOT EASY, but it is possible. What is at stake is our joy and peace, which are NOT cheap concepts but precisely why Christ came to live and die. If there is joy and pleasure in the presence of God (Ps. 16:11), then repentance is the life-giving key to our greatest pleasures.

What areas of your life do you need to confess and repent?

Do you have parts of your life that have grown stubborn and cold? Toward God or your spouse?

Do you have hidden sin that no one knows about, but that you continue to indulge?

Do you lack peace and passion for God right now?

The answer to all of these: let's humble ourselves, acknowledge our sin, confess it, and turn from it. This is the message of the angels at Jesus' birth: this is the **good news of great joy** in the birth of a Savior, Christ the Lord, who brings **peace among those on whom God's sovereign pleasure rests**.