

Ezra

Chapter 9

Ezra's Prayer About Intermarriage

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. ² They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness." ³ When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. ⁴ Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice. ⁵ Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God ⁶ and prayed: "O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. ⁷ From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today. ⁸ "But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. ⁹ Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem. ¹⁰ "But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands ¹¹ you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. ¹² Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.' ¹³ "What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this. ¹⁴ Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who

commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? ¹⁵ O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.”

9:1 *After these things had been done ... have not kept themselves separate.*

Ezra had reached Jerusalem in the fifth month (7:9). The measures dealing with the problem of intermarriage were announced in the ninth month (10:9), or four months after his arrival. Those who brought Ezra’s attention to the problem were probably the ordinary members of the community rather than the leaders, who were themselves guilty (v. 2). Malachi, who prophesied about the same time as Ezra’s mission, indicates that some Jews had broken their marriages to marry daughters of a foreign god (Mal 2:10–16), perhaps the daughters of influential landholders. One of the reasons for such intermarriages may have been the shortage of returning Jewish women who were available. What happened to a Jewish community that was lax concerning intermarriage can be seen in the example of the Elephantine settlement in Egypt, which was contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah. There the Jews who married pagan spouses expressed their devotion to pagan gods in addition to the Lord. The Elephantine community was gradually assimilated and disappeared. (CSB)

For one thing, the Lord almighty had prohibited inter-marriage with the people of the heathen nations around them. The motive for this ban was not racial but religious. Israel had been set aside as God’s chosen people, not because of any superiority on their part, but so that the true worship of God could be preserved in at least one little corner of the world until the promised Savior would come and deliver the gospel to the whole world. To keep Israel separate from the heathen nations God had given them the ceremonial law, which regulated their diet and many other aspects of their daily life. These regulations made Israel’s way of life very different from that of the peoples around them and served as kind of a fence or barrier to keep the Jews separated from surrounding peoples. Mixing with the heathen was like playing with fire. (PBC)

officials. Lay leaders in the province of Judah, which was divided into six districts. Their report to Ezra came about four months after his return to Jerusalem (10:9). (TLSB)

priests ... Levites. Even clergy were guilty of intermarrying (v 14), thus not separating themselves from the peoples of the lands. (TLSB)

neighboring peoples. The eight groups mentioned are representative of the original inhabitants of Canaan before the Israelite conquest (see note on Ex 3:8). Only the Ammonites, Moabites and Egyptians were still living there in the postexilic period (cf. 2Ch 8:7–8). (CSB)

abominations. Repeated for emphasis in vv 11, 14. Worship of false gods included sexual immorality, incest, and human sacrifice (Dt 18:9; 2Ki 16:3; Mal 2:11). (TLSB)

Canaanites, the Hittites Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, ... the Amorites. Listed in Dt 7:1–5 as people whom Israelites were not to marry. Marriage with such people posed the same spiritual threat in Ezra’s day as in the days of Moses (Ex 34:10–16). (TLSB)

Canaanites. See note on Ge 10:6. (CSB)

Hittites. See note on Ge 10:15. (CSB)

Perizzites. See note on Ge 13:7. (CSB)

Jebusites. See note on Ge 10:16. (CSB)

Ammonites, Moabites. See note on Ge 19:36–38. (CSB)

Amorites. See note on Ge 10:16. (CSB)

9:2 *holy race*. The Hebrew for this phrase is translated “holy seed” in Isa 6:13. (CSB)

Lit, “holy seed” (Is 6:13) or “offspring.” From Israel came the Offspring of Abraham, “who is Christ” (Gal 3:16). Intermarriage with Canaanites could work at cross-purposes with God’s design. He had separated the Israelites from other peoples that they might be a holy nation, a people set aside to bring to pass His eternal counsel and will (Ex 19:6; Lv 20:26). (TLSB)

led the way. In the wrong direction (see 10:18). (CSB)

unfaithfulness. See 10:6; Jos 22:16; Da 9:7. Marrying those who did not belong to the Lord was an act of infidelity for the people of Israel. (CSB)

hand of the officials. Probably not the same officials as in v 1 but others in positions of leadership. (TLSB)

foremost. Common citizens followed the example of prominent leaders. (TLSB)

9:3 *tore my tunic and cloak*. A common way to express grief or distress (see v. 5; Ge 37:29, 34; Jos 7:6; Jdg 11:35; 2Sa 13:19; 2Ch 34:27; Est 4:1; Job 1:20; Isa 36:22; Jer 41:5; Mt 26:65). (CSB)

Ezra’s actions showed his shock and displeasure. See note, Jb 1:20. These actions drew public attention to Ezra’s protest. (TLSB)

pulled hair from my head and beard. Unique in the Bible. Elsewhere we read about the shaving of one's head and/or beard (Job 1:20; Jer 41:5; 47:5; Eze 7:18; Am 8:10). When Nehemiah was confronted with the same problem of intermarriage, instead of pulling out his own hair he pulled out the hair of the offending parties (Ne 13:25). (CSB)

sat appalled. Distress and disgust again expressing protest (cf v 4). (TLSB)

9:4 *everyone who trembled.* Cf. Ex 19:16; Isa 66:2; Heb 12:21. (CSB)

Devout followers of Ezra, who were likely hated by their fellow Israelites. (TLSB)

Would we place ourselves into this group? Many people today have not only lost a fear of judgment, but even a sense of responsibility for their own sins. Even Christians have been so exposed to violence and immorality, especially through the entertainment media, that what would have shocked us twenty years ago hardly causes us to raise an eyebrow today. (PBC)

returned exiles. Evidently some who returned with Ezra were among the faithless. (TLSB)

appalled. See v. 3; cf. Da 4:19; 8:27. (CSB)

evening sacrifice. See Ex 12:6. The informants had probably visited Ezra in the morning, so that he must have sat appalled for many hours. The time of the evening sacrifice, usually about 3:00 P.M., was also the appointed time for prayer and confession (Ac 3:1). (CSB)

9:5 *self-abasement.* The Hebrew for this word later meant "fasting." See note on Lev 16:29, 31. (CSB)

Ezra had also fasted prior to making the journey to Jerusalem (8:21). (TLSB)

fell on my knees. Cf. 1Ki 8:54; Ps 95:6; Da 6:10. (CSB)

Unusual posture; normally Judeans prayed standing. (TLSB)

We are indeed "our brothers' keepers." Interceding for others before the God of mercy is one of the most important ways of fulfilling our responsibility. (PBC)

with my hands spread out. See note on Ex 9:29. Ezra's prayer (vv. 6–15) may be compared with those of Nehemiah (Ne 9:5–37) and Daniel (Da 9:4–19). (CSB)

Spread out my hands, as if to lay hold on the mercy of God. (ACC)

9:6 *ashamed and disgraced*. See 8:22 and note; Lk 18:13. Ezra felt both an inner shame before God and an outward humiliation before people for his own sins and the sins of his people. The two Hebrew verbs often occur together; see Ps 35:4; Isa 45:16; Jer 31:19 (“ashamed and humiliated”). (CSB)

Ezra was ashamed to request a military escort from the king (8:22). His shame, as he prayed to God, was greater still. (TLSB)

Ezra’s sense of responsibility for the sins of others might seem peculiar to us. Yet it was an appropriate reaction. This becomes clear when we remember that God’s people are an organism that works like the human body. Poison which enters the body through a wound in the foot can kill the whole body. Today, too, when a member of Christ’s body, the church, falls into a grievous sin, the work of the whole church can suffer. When an un-repentant sin is ignored, the poison can spread to other members of the body. (PBC)

lift my face. Though God is everywhere, humans think of Him as being “up” in heaven. (TLSB)

our sins ... our guilt. Cf. also vv. 7, 13, 15; 10:10, 19; 1Ch 21:3; 2Ch 24:18; Ps 38:4. (CSB)

Ezra began his prayer with the singular pronoun but changed to the plural to show that he identified himself with the people for whom he was confessing sin and interceding. (TLSB)

has reached to the heavens. But God’s love is more than a match for our guilt (Ps 103:11–12). (CSB)

Figure of speech comparing guilt to a flood (perhaps Noah’s flood) that overwhelms us and reaches as high as heaven itself. (TLSB)

9:7 *From the days of our forefathers*. Israelites were conscious of their corporate solidarity with their ancestors. (CSB)

People in Ezra’s day had not learned the lesson that God had tried to teach their ancestors by putting them through the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity in Babylonia. (TLSB)

sword. Cf. Ne 4:13. In Eze 21 “the sword of the king of Babylon” (21:19) is described as an instrument of divine judgment. (CSB)

humiliation. Cf. Da 9:7–8; 2Ch 32:21. (CSB)

9:8 remnant. See Ge 45:7; Isa 1:9; 10:20–22 and notes. (Quoted in Ro 9:29, where it is linked with Isa 10:22–23. Isaiah often refers to the remnant that will survive God’s judgment on the nation (see 4:3; 10:20–23; 11:11, 16; 46:3) and **10:20–22 remnant.** See note on 1:9. “A remnant will return” was the name of Isaiah’s first son (see NIV text note on 7:3). A faithful remnant led by Hezekiah survived the Assyrian invasion of 701 B.C. (see 37:4). Later, a remnant returned from Babylonian exile). (CSB)

Refers to small band of survivors who returned to Jerusalem from Babylonia (Zep 2:7; Hg 1:12; Zec 8:6, 11–12). (TLSB)

firm place. Lit. “nail” or “peg,” like a nail driven into a wall (see Isa 22:23 and note) or a tent peg driven into the ground (Isa 33:20; 54:2). (CSB)

Indicates that the remnant was immovably anchored within God’s holy place (Is 33:20). (TLSB)

light to our eyes. An increase in light means vitality and joy (Ps 13:3; 19:8; Ecc 8:1). (CSB)

Spiritual enlightenment producing hope and joy. Cf 1Sm 14:27. (TLSB)

reviving. Or, “refreshment”; a noun for “life,” as though raised from the dead (used again in v 9). (TLSB)

9:9 slaves. Though the Persian government permitted some religious freedom, Israel was still in servitude to a foreign power. (TLSB)

not forsaken. Though God had not forsaken His people, they had forsaken His commandments (v 10). (TLSB)

kings of Persia. The Achaemenid Persian kings were favorably disposed to the Jews: Cyrus (539–530 B.C.) gave them permission to return (ch. 1); his son Cambyses (530–522), though not named in the Bible, also favored the Jews, as we learn from Elephantine papyri; Darius I (522–486) renewed the decree of Cyrus (ch. 6); his son Xerxes (486–465) granted privileges and protection to Jews (Est 8–10); his son Artaxerxes I (465–424) gave authorizations to Ezra (ch. 7) and to Nehemiah (Ne 2). (CSB)

repair its ruins. Isaiah had prophesied that the Lord would restore Jerusalem’s ruins (Isa 44:26), which would burst into singing (Isa 52:9; cf. 58:12; 61:4). (CSB)

wall of protection. Used of a city wall only in Mic 7:11. The use here is metaphorical (cf. Zec 2:4–5). (CSB)

9:11–12 The references are not to a single OT passage but to several passages, such as Dt 11:8–9; Isa 1:19; Eze 37:25. (CSB)

Summary of commandments forbidding intermarriage with people of other nations (cf v 1). Israel’s prophets often warned against being “yoked with unbelievers” (2Co 6:14), becoming one with them in their abominations. (TLSB)

9:11 *your servants the prophets*. See notes on Jer 7:25; Zec 1:6. (CSB)

Standard designation for the prophetic succession, beginning with Moses and culminating in Christ (Dt 18:15–18; Jer 7:25–26; Ac 3:13). (TLSB)

corruption. Of Canaanite idolatry and the immoral practices associated with it (Lev 18:3; 2Ch 29:5; La 1:17; Eze 7:20; 36:17). The degrading practices and beliefs of the Canaanites are described in texts from ancient Ugarit (see chart on “Ancient Texts Relating to the OT”). (CSB)

FILLED IT WITH..FROM ONE ENF TO THE OTHER – The abominations have been like a sweeping mighty torrent, that has increased till it filled the whole land, and carried every thing before it. (ACC)

9:12 *do not give your daughters*. After the exile, economic advantages made the temptation particularly great to “intermarry with the peoples who practice[d] these abominations” (v 14). (TLSB)

peace or prosperity. Economic and social aspects of marriage were much stronger then, surpassing the modern interest in romantic love as the basis for marriage. (TLSB)

9:13 PUNISHED US LESS THAN OUR SINS – Great, numerous, and oppressive as our calamities have been, yet merely as temporal punishments, they have been much less than our provocations have deserved. (ACC)

9:14 *be angry*. God’s anger came upon the Israelites because they had violated his covenant with them (Dt 7:4; 11:16–17; 29:26–28; Jos 23:16; Jdg 2:20). (CSB)

until You consumed us. For Israelites to continue to intermarry with foreigners was dangerous. God would be justified in consuming them “so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape.” (TLSB)

9:15 *you are righteous*. See note on Ps 4:1. (CSB)

our guilt. A proper sense of God’s holiness makes us aware of our unworthiness. See Isa 6:1–5; Lk 5:8. For comparable passages of national lament see Ps 44; 60; 74; 79–80; 83; 85; 90; 108; 126; 129; 137. (CSB)

Ch 9 Ezra expresses remorse and shame when he learns of the unfaithful Judeans' marriages. Today, few topics have grown more sensitive than the issues surrounding marriage. This is ultimately because families fail to believe in or teach what God's Word teaches about the holy blessings of marriage. Like Ezra, express your shame, remorse, and prayers to God when sinful notions of marriage tear at your family. Study and share the teachings of God's Word about marriage (see esp notes, Gn 2:18, 22, 24; Eph 5:22, 25, 28, 31–32, 33). Christ the Bridegroom is also our Redeemer, who removes all our shame and comforts our remorseful hearts. • Jesus, hear my prayers for family and friends, that they would enjoy the blessings of holy wedlock according to Your Word. Amen. (TLSB)