

Ezra

Chapter 9

Ezra Prays About Intermarriage

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. 2 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.” 3 As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. 4 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. 5 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, 6 saying: “O my God, I am ashamed and blush 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. 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, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. 8 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. 9 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. 10 “And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, 11 which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are 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. 12 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.’ 13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and 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, 14 shall we break your commandments again and intermarry 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? 15 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.”

9:1 *After these things had been done ... have not separated themselves.* 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)

peoples of the lands. The eight groups mentioned are representative of the original inhabitants of Canaan before the Israelite conquest. 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)

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)

has been foremost. In the wrong direction (see 10:18). (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 my 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 *all 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 *from my fasting.* Ezra had also fasted prior to making the journey to Jerusalem (8:21). (TLSB)

fell upon 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)

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

9:6 *ashamed and blush.* See 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 iniquities... our guilt. Cf. 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)

mounted up 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 fathers.* 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)

shame. Cf. Da 9:7–8; 2Ch 32:21. (CSB)

9:8 *remnant.* 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. 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)

secure hold. 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)

brighten 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)

give us 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.* 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)

impurity. 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. (CSB)

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)

9:14 *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 *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)