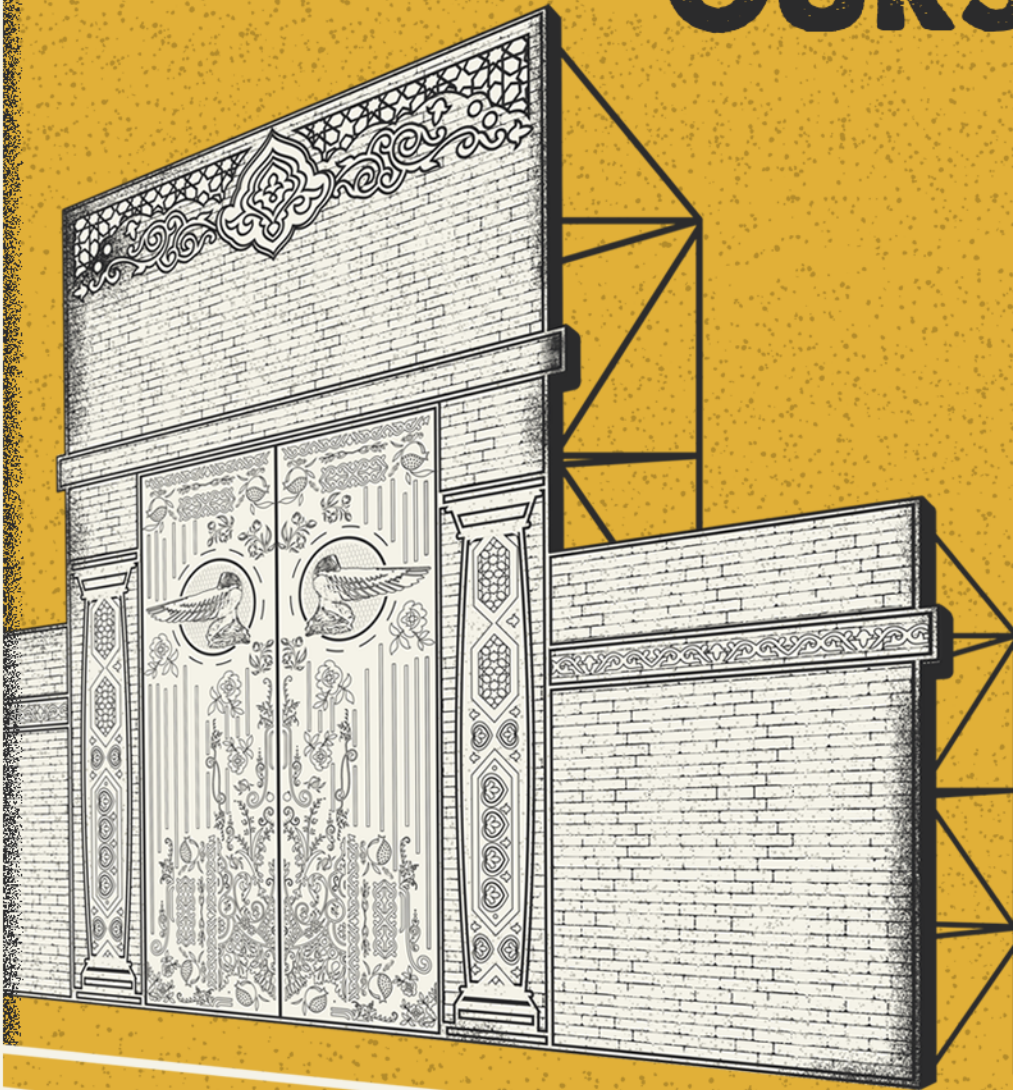


THE LIES WE TELL OURSELVES

the book of
EZRA



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Introduction

In the Old Testament, there is a period of captivity summarized by the word “exile”. The exile began with the nation of Babylon conquering God’s people and destroying Jerusalem. This happened as a fulfillment of God’s covenant curse for their disobedience.

Yet God promised that this exile would come to an end after 70 years. This promise was fulfilled when King Cyrus of Persia allowed Israel to begin returning and rebuilding.

The book of Ezra records this return from exile. What God’s people come home to is a broken city and a ruined temple. Decades into this rebuilding process, the priest-scribe Ezra arrives to begin his work of *spiritual rebuilding*. Israel sees this as starting over, a new step out of the curse.

Yet in the midst of so much Spirit-empowered starting over - rebuilding, repentance, renewal - there are some significant moments of anti-climax built into Ezra. For example: the rebuilt temple? God doesn’t show up in glory like He did with Solomon’s temple (see 2 Chronicles 7). Why is this?

The anti-climactic nature of Ezra leads us to want - and recognize our need for - something more. Yes, God orchestrated this re-start, but along the way, the people of God were met with disappointments because they told themselves lies like,

"If we just get out of Babylon..."

"If we just build the altar and temple..."

"If we just divorce our unbelieving wives..."

Fundamentally, these returning exiles told themselves the lie that starting over would meet their greatest need.

Living in the lies we tell ourselves is like walking through a Hollywood production of Sherlock Holmes and believing it's London. But this facade isn't just inconvenient or damaging, it's eternally damning. No start over, devotion, or goodness on our part will bring us into right relationship with God and remove the wrath hanging over our heads; Jesus alone meets our greatest need. Until we meet Him, we exist in exile under the curse of God.

Important Info

Ezra covers almost 100 years of true history (538 BC - 457 BC).

And although the book bears his name, Ezra doesn't appear until chapter 7 of Ezra.

Book Breakdown

- **Ezra 1-2 focuses on the returning remnant**, the believers whom God protected while they were in exile.
- **Ezra 3-6 focuses on the rebuilding** of Jerusalem, including the altar and temple.
- **Ezra 7-10 focuses on the spiritual renewal** brought by the priest-scribe Ezra. This renewal happens about 57 years after the new temple dedication ceremony.

Ezra is a historical narrative/story. It's a story (*about the triune God bringing His people back and initiating rebuilding and renewal*) within the story of the Bible. Ezra isn't written *to us* or *about us*, but, as the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 15:4, Ezra is *for us*. There's much to learn about God, human nature, and the salvation promised and provided by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Key Words, Locations, and Names

Exile

A word meaning “away from home”. We see exile when the Israelites are conquered by Babylon and taken away from their homes as captives. This was God’s covenant curse upon the Israelites for their continual sin against Him (see Jeremiah 25).

Exile is a theme present throughout Scripture, starting in Genesis 3 when Adam, the representative of all humanity, was exiled from the presence of God due to his sin against God. Israel, God’s chosen people, also sin against Him and are exiled as a consequence. And we, too, have sinned against God and therefore remain exiled from His holy presence. Jesus arrives as the second Adam, truly God and truly human, and perfectly obeys for us then suffers the ultimate exile under God’s wrath in our place. By trusting Jesus, we are reconciled to God. And as Christians, we live in the tension of having our exile from God resolved while also waiting for Jesus to return to bring us - physically - into our true home, the new creation.

Babylon

The ancient city where Israel was led as captives in exile. Babylon was the capitol of the Babylonian empire. While it was an actual city, Babylon is used figuratively in some parts of the Bible (1 Peter and Revelation) to refer to evil and sinful empires. Cyrus, the king of Persia, eventually conquered and captured Babylon.

Persia

An ancient empire that conquered the Babylonians. Since Persia took over Babylonian territory, the Persians were in charge of Jerusalem during the time period of Ezra when Cyrus, king of Persia, allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem

Nicknamed the "City of David" because king David conquered the city and made it the center of Israel's life. The city became even more significant when David's son, king Solomon, built the temple in Jerusalem, thus making the city the center of worship for God's people. Jerusalem is eventually destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and God's people are led into exile.

Ezra

Both a priest and a scribe whose family line goes back to Moses's brother Aaron. Ezra grew up in exile but remained faithful to Yahweh, the God of Israel. He also likely held some sort of position of influence with the Persian king Artaxerxes. Ezra doesn't come to Jerusalem until 57 years after the temple has been rebuilt (in Ezra chapter 7).

Zerubbabel

A leader among the returning exiles. He had a royal lineage (see Haggai 2:23).

Jeshua

A leader and priest among the returning exiles (see Haggai 1:1 where his name is spelled "Joshua").

Haggai

A prophet present among the returning exiles whose prophecies from God motivate the continuing rebuild of the temple (see the book of Haggai in the Old Testament).

Zechariah

A prophet present among the returning exiles whose prophecies from God motivate the continuing rebuild of the temple (see the book of Zechariah in the Old Testament).

Cyrus

The Persian king God used to begin fulfilling His promise to bring His people back to the Promised Land (i.e. Jerusalem). Cyrus's announcement to the exiled people is prophesied in Isaiah 44:28 and Jeremiah 29:10-14.

Artaxerxes

Pronounced "Art-uh-zerk-sees". King of Persia about 57 years after the new temple is finished in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes gives Ezra authority to establish God's Law in Jerusalem.

Ezra 7:1-10

MAIN POINT

Almost 60 years after the events of Ezra 6, Ezra himself is introduced. Jeshua and Zerubbabel led the rebuild of Jerusalem; now Ezra will lead the renewal of God's people. But with God's law as the tool for his work, this renewal can only go so deep in the hearts of the people. As the apostle Paul will later write,

"We know that a person is not counted righteous by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."¹

If we hope to see lasting transformation in ourselves, we look to Jesus, whose flawless fulfillment of the law opened the way for true, lasting renewal.

GROUP INTRO

Share about a time when you had to wait a long time for something really good. What kept you going as you waited?

¹ Galatians 2:16

TEXT

1. How is Ezra introduced in these verses? What in this introduction reminds you of other portions of the Bible?

Leader help: Ezra's lineage connects him to the first high priest, Aaron, who was Moses's brother. This means that Ezra is in line to be a priest. He is also called a "scribe" who is skilled in understanding and teaching God's law.

These facts about Ezra connect him and the remnant to important biblical events like the exodus in Exodus 13-15, the construction of the tabernacle, and the setting up of the sacrificial system, showing that God is still faithful to His elect even after many years.

Additionally, Ezra must have held a high position in Babylonia because he's able to directly ask the king questions (see verse 6), something that an ordinary citizen couldn't do.

2. Verse 6 contains some key information for seeing God's goodness. How does verse 6 reveal His goodness? What does this verse tell us God has done and is doing?

Leader help: God gifts Ezra with skill to understand and teach His law, which would help restore relationship between God and the remnant; God gave Israel the law, which was a sign of His covenant relationship with them even though they were undeserving sinners; God sovereignly guides Ezra by giving him favor with the Babylonian king; God preserves the priestly lineage, ensuring that forgiveness can be extended through them.

3. How would you define “the Law of Moses/the Law of the LORD”? What is it and what was its purpose for God’s people in Ezra’s time?

Leader help: These words can refer to the first 5 books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) as well as God’s 600+ commands to Israel that are contained in Exodus - Deuteronomy. A good summary of God’s law is found in Exodus 20:2-17 and in Jesus’s words in Matthew 22:37-40.

The law described how to be in covenant relationship with God - how to worship Him, what to do when you sinned, how to receive forgiveness, etc.

4. Based on this passage, what would you say is Ezra’s strategy for bringing renewal to God’s people? Why might this be his strategy and why won’t it bring ultimate, lasting renewal?

Leader help: Ezra relies on the Word of God - he studies it and resolves to both do it and teach it to God’s people. He is trusting that God’s Word is powerful and able to bring about renewal.

The sinfulness of the human heart, however, will prevent lasting renewal from occurring in Ezra’s time. As Genesis 8:21 states, human beings are intent on doing evil from the time we’re born. It’s only by trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit by faith that we can be given lasting renewal as a gift of grace.

APPLICATION

1. Read through the following and then answer the question. Christians have historically understood that there are 3 ways for believers to use God's law:

1. **As a mirror:** God's law shows us both God's perfect righteousness and our profound sinfulness. Like a mirror showing us who we really are, the law reveals our inability to obey on our own so we will run to Jesus.
2. **As a restraint for evil:** God's law can't change human hearts, but it provides some protection for us by threatening God's judgment and punishment. Governments pass their own laws in line with God's law, offering a restraint for evil.
3. **As a moral guide:** God's law reveals His unchanging character and will - *what's pleasing to God* - so that Christians who have new hearts can look to the law as a guide for how to think, speak, and act, by the power of the Holy Spirit.²

Knowing this, **do you view God's commandments with gratitude and humility or do you view God's commandments as burdensome? Why?**

² See this website for a more in-depth explanation: <https://thirdmill.org/answers/answer.asp/file/40602>

Leader help: when we trust in Jesus and receive a new heart, the Holy Spirit begins to work in us to help us see the beauty of God's commandments. If you're seeing God's commandments as burdensome, it may be an invitation to see God's grace, love, and beauty once again through prayer and Scripture.

2. When this passage mentions God's guidance and favor upon Ezra, it's not flashy and miraculous, but ordinary (example: God ensured that the king gave Ezra the "yes" to return to Jerusalem). Where in your own life do you want answers or guidance from God? What might be some signs that He is guiding you in ordinary ways?
3. Scripture shows us that calls to obedience or new behaviors and habits alone won't change the human heart. How do you see people - or even yourself - attempting to use these strategies today? How can we turn attention to the gospel instead?

PRAYER

Thank Jesus for fulfilling the law for us and in our place, since we could never perfectly obey God.

Passage to guide your prayers: Galatians 4:4

Admit to God where you have failed to trust in Christ alone for both salvation and sanctification. Ask Him to help you rest in His gift of righteousness.

Passage to guide your prayers: Romans 7:22-25

Ask God to help you notice His providence and guidance in your life so you can live free from fear and foolishness.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 31:3

Ezra 7:11-28

MAIN POINT

From the time of Eden to now, God has extended abundant grace to humanity. This chapter highlights God's faithfulness to His undeserving people, a faithfulness extended through the hands of a government official in a foreign land.

No matter where we find ourselves, the covenant faithfulness of God, demonstrated most fully in Jesus, is the assurance we need to move forward in God's call to live as faithful exiles until Jesus returns.

GROUP INTRO

Ezra had the king's ear in his time. If you could sit down for lunch with someone famous, who would it be? Why?

TEXT

1. Ezra is described as both a priest and a scribe. What role did a priest play in God's community? Do priests exist in the church today? What Scriptures support your answer?

Leader help: Priests were God's designated representatives and spiritual leaders from the tribe of Levi - they led people in sacrifices, prayers, praise, and taught God's Word (see Ex. Num. 18:6-7. They also guarded the temple.

Although the Roman Catholic Church appoints priests, there is no biblical evidence, justification, or command to do so. Instead, the entire Christian community collectively exists as as a priesthood under the leadership of the ultimate High Priest, Jesus (1 Pet. 2:4-5; Rev. 1:5-6). We are to make ourselves available to God for His purposes (Rom. 12:1-2) and offer up spiritual sacrifices like praise and generous living (Heb. 13:15-16). We are also responsible for helping people know Jesus and the Bible (Matt. 28:18-20).

2. Read verses 14, 18, and 25. These verses state that there is a rule/standard that Ezra must act in line with. What is this rule/standard? Where does this rule/standard come from?

Leader help: The standard is God's law, as revealed in the first five books of the Bible. Earlier in Ezra we read that God's law came through Moses but from God. By acting in line with God's Word, Ezra is acting in the best interests of God's people.

3. How does the king tell Ezra to use the funds he'll be given? Why does the king want God to be obeyed in this way? For help, look at verse 24.

Leader help: For the worship of Israel's God - the temple, sacrifices, and institution of God's law. The king fears God's wrath, which may be because he has heard stories about God's wrath upon Egypt, Israel, and other world powers.

4. How do verses 27-28 demonstrate the faithfulness of God to His people despite their sin and rebellion?

Leader help: The reference to "our fathers" reminds us of God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 12), Jacob/Israel (Gen. 28:13-15), and David (2 Sam. 7). God will be faithful to His own words. God is also still working amongst His people despite centuries of rebellion and with full knowledge that they would rebel again in the future.

APPLICATION

1. Though the temple was permanently destroyed in 70 AD, God still calls His people to financially contribute to His work in this world³. What are some amazing things that happen through the financial generosity of God's people?

Leader note: We sometimes look for overtly miraculous or temporal blessings as evidence that God is working, but the most amazing thing God does through our generosity is save sinners through the preaching of the gospel.

³ See 1 Corinthians 9:14; 1 Timothy 5:17-18.

2. God can obviously influence leaders and the decisions that they make. What prevents you from trusting God with government leaders and their decisions today? Do you have anxiety, hatred, or distrust that you need to repent for?
3. Ezra uses a term for God's *covenant faithfulness* (translated as "steadfast love" in verse 28) when praising Him. Explain how God has demonstrated His covenant faithfulness in your life so that we can praise Him with you.

PRAYER

Confess your sins of distrust to God, especially the distrust you've shown in the face of government leaders and their decisions.

Passage to guide your prayers: Romans 3:23

Praise God for His steadfast love and the specific ways He has been faithful to you.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 25:6-7

Ask God to help you fear Him alone and to live with your plans, desires, and ideas under the authority of His Word.

Passage to guide your prayers: Proverbs 29:25

Ezra 8

MAIN POINT

Where there's danger, there's prayer. Or at least there ought to be.

Ezra and the exiles begin the dangerous journey to Jerusalem, and they aren't banking on themselves to get there.

God shows us here that following Him isn't primarily about our radical boldness or committed faithfulness; it's about turning to God in our weaknesses and sins and believing that He'll hear from heaven and be good to us for the sake of His glorious name.

GROUP INTRO

Throughout church history there have been various disciplines that Christians used in their pursuit of godliness. Out of the few disciplines below, which do you most often engage with? Which do you neglect? Why?

Disciplines

Prayer, Bible study, fasting, silence and solitude, evangelism.

TEXT

1. Read verse 15. Why is the absence of any sons of Levi, or “Levites”, a problem?

Leader help: Ezra was tasked with bringing a measure of civil order and spiritual instruction. The Levites were key leaders in Israel’s history and did both of these in the past as part of their responsibilities (see 1 Chronicles 23:3-4) and 2 Chronicles 35:3). We learn from this that Ezra wasn’t thinking he could charge into Jerusalem on his own; he knew he needed help and he knew God could provide that help.

2. Read verses 21-22. How are fasting and prayer demonstrations of humility?

Leader help: These disciplines require us to admit and embrace our own inability and weakness and show that it is God alone who is our strength and refuge.

3. Imagine that you have to explain how verse 23 shows God’s grace and mercy. What would you say?

Leader help: God had the right to ignore or destroy humanity the moment we sinned against Him. None of us are born basically good and none of us rightly worships God like He deserves. Yet here He is, listening to His people like an attentive Father, graciously giving them protection and care that they don’t deserve.

4. Explain the meaning of the phrase “the hand of our God” found in verses 18, 22, 31. How did Ezra know that “the hand of our God” was with them?

Leader help: This is a phrase that basically means God’s intervention. Ezra sees how God is providing, protecting, and responding to prayers, and it gives him even more confidence in God, which in turn strengthens him for his task of renewal when he arrives in Jerusalem.

APPLICATION

1. Humility is necessary for following Jesus. Read 1 Peter 5:5-7. How can meditating on these truths help you grow in humility?
2. Where or how does pride most often show up in your life? Is there any way we can help one another mortify (kill) pride? For help, see Jesus’s words in Matthew 23:12.
3. What are some ways we can grow to trust God when faced with anxiety and fear? How can being known in Christian community help you grow in this?
4. Is there anything that we as a group might need to fast and pray for? If so, dialogue and then commit to doing so, ensuring that you follow up with one another during the fast.

PRAYER

Admit your pride and fears and ask God to forgive you and renew you.

Passage to guide your prayers: Proverbs 29:23

Praise Jesus for the guarantee of His guidance, even when it seems as if He is totally absent.

Passage to guide your prayers: John 10:14

Ezra 9

MAIN POINT

Priests not only taught and offered sacrifices, they prayed. Just like Moses interceded for rebellious Israel, here Ezra prays for the remnant who have exposed the community to the dangers of idolatry and God's wrath.

But an even greater danger is exposed when Ezra says to God, *"We are before You in our guilt..."*

We all stand guilty before the Holy One until we're cleansed by the blood of the truer and better priest, Jesus Christ.

GROUP INTRO

Have you ever found out something shocking about your family's history? What was it and why were you shocked?

TEXT

1. Up to this point, external challenges were faced by the remnant. Now Ezra faces an internal challenge. Read Ezra 9:1-4, then read Deuteronomy 7:1-5. What's the internal challenge Ezra faces? What could happen if there's no repentance or changes in the community?

Leader help: Marriage to the peoples of the land, a direct violation of God's specific commands. The threat here is twofold: the people could become idolaters instead of God-followers and God could execute judgment against Israel once more and throw them out of the Promised Land again.

2. We know that God despises racism because it's a form of pride and hatred. What, then, is His primary concern in commanding His people not to marry "the peoples of the lands"? How is this command a demonstration of His love?

Leader help: God's concern is worship, not racial purity. The remnant had married unbelievers who didn't share their faith. The false religions of surrounding nations practiced cult prostitution, child sacrifice, and other unholy ceremonies, which would corrupt Israel and ultimately lead them away from God. Since God is the source of joy and life, to be led away from Him is to be destroyed. God doesn't want this for His people. Examples of God's people marrying "peoples of the lands" who trusted Him include: Exodus 2:16-22 (Moses marries a Midianite) and Ruth 4:13 (the Israelite Boaz marries Ruth, a Moabite).

3. Read Ezra 9:5-7. How would you describe Ezra's attitude and actions as he realizes the sin of those he loves and serves? How do Ezra's actions and his heart point us forward to Jesus's actions and heart? What are some differences between Ezra's actions here and Jesus's actions?

Leader help: Ezra is repenting on behalf of his people with great love for God and concern for the people.

Jesus, on the other hand, goes beyond mere prayers - He bears the sins of His people and the punishment against those sins on the cross, where He suffered God's wrath that should have been upon us. Jesus did this out of sheer love for God and His people. Jesus's heart for His people is clearly described in Matthew 11:28-30 and is seen when He lays down His life for those He loves (see John 15:12-13).

4. Though Ezra was a faithful priest who prayed for himself and God's people, he was merely a man. Read Hebrews 7:23-28. Describe all of the ways this passage tells us Jesus's priestly service is far better than Ezra's.

Leader help: Ensure that you give adequate time to really read and dig into this Hebrews passage. The longer we look at Jesus, the more of His goodness we'll see.

APPLICATION

1. Author Tim Keller wrote that idols are *“anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give”* and *“an idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’”* **Have you discovered what you tend to idolize? How do you repent of this idolatry? How is Jesus better?**
2. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, He invites us into freedom and righteousness. Read Hebrews 12:7-11. How have you experienced God’s discipline in your life? Did it result in deeper joy in God?
3. Though we may not be totally comfortable doing so, confessing sin together is both freeing and community-building. Does anyone have hesitations about confessing sin in our group? Why might this be hard for you?

PRAYER

Praise the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

Passage to guide your prayers: Ephesians 1:3

Confess specific sins as a group.

Passage to guide your prayers: Proverbs 20:9

Ezra 10

MAIN POINT

The last chapter of Ezra is marked by a tragic solution to Israel's idolatry.

Though God had commanded His people to not marry wicked unbelievers⁴ and had brought judgment upon Israel for their disobedience before⁵, the Israelites find themselves standing before God in guilt. The situation is dire. The remnant is at risk of not just another exile but destruction.

In an attempt to faithfully lead the people in repentance, the command to divorce goes out.

Ezra 10 reminds us that idolatry runs deep in the human heart because sin runs rampant in the human heart. The only solution is the gift of a new heart.

GROUP INTRO

Throughout our study of Ezra, what have you learned about God? What has God shown you about yourself and the lies you believe?

⁴ Deuteronomy 7:1-4

⁵ Jeremiah 25:8-114

TEXT

1. Review where we are at in the story of Ezra. What did Ezra learn in chapter 9 and why is the situation so dire for Israel at this point?

Leader help: God's people have directly disobeyed His written Word and stand before Him guilty. This includes Israel's spiritual leaders (see Ezra 9:1). If they do not repent for their sin and turn back to God in faith, they risk God's justice.

2. Read Ezra 10:1-5. In Ezra 10, do you notice God affirming this plan? If so, where? If not, why do the leaders move forward?

Leader help: Nowhere in the chapter does God affirm this plan and nowhere in Scripture does God command divorce. Why do they move forward? As commentator Derek Kidner writes, "While divorce is always hateful to God, and a witness to human 'hardness of heart', the situation described in Ezra 9 and 10 was a classic example of one in which the lesser of two evils had to be chosen. If a serious reason for divorce could ever exist, this had a better claim than most to come within that category."

3. Take turns reading through Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Malachi 2:16, and Mark 10:2-9. From these passages, what is God's view of divorce?

Leader help: God hates divorce, but He also recognizes that we are sinful and fallen creatures, so He made a provision for divorce. But His desire from the beginning has been that a marriage between one biological male and one biological female be a lifetime commitment.

4. How are the leaders and people approaching their sin? What is their heart and what are their actions in the face of their evil? How does this show their faith?

Leader help: They show deep grief and sorrow over their sin and a willingness to take drastic action. They fast, weep, pray, vow, and take actions, despite all of the emotional suffering involved. They do not make excuses or ask God to make them feel okay in their current sinful situation. Their willingness to endure this pain and all of its complexities for the sake of holiness shows their true - albeit imperfect - faith.

5. How does the ending of Ezra make clear the need for the redeemer Jesus?

Leader help: In their recent history, Israel was punished for their covenant disobedience to God and then given grace by God Himself. Despite this, they still lived in sin. This is a picture of all of our hearts - we are, as John Calvin put it, "idol factories". We need our sins forgiven, we need someone to obey for us, we need new hearts. All of this comes through faith alone in Christ alone.

APPLICATION

1. We learn from Ezra 10 that even if all of our external problems were resolved, the worst problem remains: we still have sin in us. What kinds of solutions does our culture offer for human problems that just won't ultimately work?
2. When in your life have you been brought to the point of this kind of true repentance, the kind that required hard changes? What role did the gospel play in your repentance?
3. When you're confronted with sin in your own life, what is your response? How might you grow to be able to respond in humble repentance?

PRAYER

Praise God for the specific things He has revealed to you throughout Ezra.

Passage to guide your prayers: Romans 15:4

Ask God to search you and reveal to you where you need to repent.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 44:20-21