

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 7

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Trouble in Covenant City, part 1 (Ezra 9)

Combining the time indicators in Ezra 7:9; 8:31; and 10:9, it appears that Ezra was in Jerusalem about four and one half months when the problem of Ezra 9:1-2 was brought to his attention.¹

I. A Report of Faithlessness – Ezra 9:1-4

A. Sad news (Ezra 9:1-2)

If Ezra had been in Jerusalem for four and one half months, why was this news such a shock? Why would he not know? A possible answer comes from Ezra 8:36, namely that upon arrival Ezra did not stay in Jerusalem, but “traveled extensively ... to bring his credentials from the Persian king to the attention of the high officials of the Persian empire who lived close to Judah.”²

This was a problem of sanctification (“the people of Israel ... have not separated themselves”; Ezra 9:1), an extensive problem since the priests and the Levites were implicated in it as well. It was the old problem of intermarriage with pagans (Ezra 9:2), violating the Torah (Exod. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-5). Note the list of the pagan groups here at the end of verse 1.

“The holy seed [lit.] have mixed themselves with the peoples of the lands” (Ezra 9:2). There is the trouble — again. When the people of God lose their *distinctiveness* they cease to be his people, at least in any tangible, visible way. The church must always be a *different* people — they can never, they dare never, *fit* in this world.

B. Violent reaction (Ezra 9:3-4)

Note Ezra’s visible reaction: he tore his clothes, tore out hair from his head and beard, and sat “appalled” (desolated, devastated; Ezra 9:3). Ezra seems simply beside himself in helpless frustration. Others share Ezra’s essential reaction, even if theirs does not duplicate his exactly (Ezra 9:4). “Every one,” Ezra says, “who trembled at the words of the God of Israel over the treachery of the exiles”

¹ Cundall, *NBC*, 1970 ed., 403.

² Fensham, *NICOT*, 124.

gathered to him. Note how this “trembling” is precisely what God wants in his people: “But this is the one to whom I will look — to the one who is afflicted and stricken in spirit and who trembles over my word” (Isa. 66:2). That is the paradigm for the church.

Note two corollaries of this report of faithlessness in verses 1-4:

1. The professing people of God are very disappointing. Never be surprised at how sinful covenant people can be.
2. We usually cannot understand a genuinely holy reaction to sin, as for example the violence and intensity of Ezra’s response in verse 3. That says more about us, sadly, than about anything else.

II. A Prayer of Confession – Ezra 9:5-15

Note in Ezra 9:5 the place of the visible and tangible in prayer:

torn clothes = anguish
 bow on knees = humiliation
 spread out hands = pleading

Don’t demean the external as of no consequence (see Joel 2:12-13a where both the external and the internal are held together.) Let us survey what Ezra’s prayer of confession covers:

A. The immensity of guilt (Ezra 9:6-7)

1. Our guilt in quantity (Ezra 9:6b) – note how Ezra tries to express the huge mass of guilt in these pictures.
2. Our guilt in history (Ezra 9:7a) – our guilt, Ezra says, goes back to our fathers, is longstanding, and has been experienced in judgments, the effects of which continue to the present time (“as it is today”).

Note Ezra’s switch to the plural pronoun “our” in verse 6b – here is identification with the sins of the people.

B. The moment of grace (Ezra 9:8-9)

Verse 8 begins “and now,” indicating a significant moment. The next phrase, literally “like a littleness of a moment,” shows that this significant moment is a brief one (“for a brief moment” NASB), and it therefore stands in contrast to the whole dominant history of unfaithfulness and judgment summarized in verse 7. In

this brief moment there has been “grace from Yahweh our God.” Observe how this grace is “specked out.”

It is the grace of *survival*: “grace from Yahweh our God to leave us an escaped group” (or remnant).

It is the grace of *security*: “and to give us a peg in his holy place.” The “peg” usually means a tent peg, driven into the ground as secure anchorage for a tent; or it could refer, as in Isaiah 22:23, to a peg or nail securely fastened in a wall so that items could be hung on it. Clines takes the “peg” to refer to the rebuilt temple, as the following phrase “in his holy place” might suggest. In any case, the idea is that Israel has been given some degree of security, of ballast, in her otherwise tenuous post-exilic experience.

It is the grace of *encouragement*: “that our God may give light to our eyes and give us a little reviving in our slavery.”

It is the grace of *constancy*, implied in 9a: “For we are slaves, yet in our slavery our God has not forsaken us.”

It is the grace of *providence*: “he has extended his faithful love to us even under the kings of Persia and revived us to rebuild the Temple of our God, restore its ruins” (NJB) — all the drama and history of Ezra 1-6 is packed into that half-verse.

It is the grace of *protection*: “to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.” The wall (*gader*) is metaphorical for protection. It is not a literal city wall since it is “*in Judah* and in Jerusalem.”

So, the immensity of guilt (Ezra 9:6-7) is met by the majesty of grace (Ezra 9:8-9).

C. The folly of unfaithfulness (Ezra 9:10-12)

In verse 11, when quoting the prophets’ words, Ezra ransacks the vocabulary of impurity and uncleanness as he refers to the former residents of their land. Verses 11-12 summarize the message of the prophets: not only must Israel not intermarry (v. 12a), but there must be an *ongoing, unrelenting hostility* (v. 12b) toward such people and their impact. This is Israel’s only hope (v. 12c). The folly of it all appears in verse 10, before Ezra alludes to the prophets’ constant message: “What shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments.” Ezra is saying that this has not been some recent piece of revelation we have violated but one that we have had through the prophets *for years*. Hence, we are inexcusable.

D. The peril of opportunity (Ezra 9:13-14)

Note the text: “After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this, shall we again break your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?”

Observe that here Ezra recounts the experience of judgment (v. 13a), the restraint of mercy (v. 13b), before suggesting that they may have reached the edge of God’s patience (v. 14). Ezra raises the question: “Will we sin away our day of grace?” As Kidner says: “The prayer ends with clear recognition that God has every reason to wash His hands of this community... This was no exaggerated fancy. There were other Israelites scattered abroad, through whom the promises could be fulfilled” (p. 69).

E. The frustration of prayer (Ezra 9:15)

Yahweh is righteous (v. 15a) and we are guilty (v. 15b). What hope can there possibly be?

Note that here we see both *suspense* (in that there is no definite, particular plea that he makes — the prayer leaves us hanging) and *frustration* (i.e., on Ezra’s part, for what can he ask? He can only throw Israel upon the mercy of Yahweh).

The word *peletah* (“escaped remnant” NASB) occurs in verses 8, 13, 14 and 15. As we look back on the book of Ezra, we must say that it is a wonder there is an escaped remnant in light of the enemies who hate us (Ezra 1-6) and the sins we love (Ezra 9-10).