

No Shame, No Gain (Ezra 9)

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[0 : 00] Okay, so I'll just turn to the Bible verse. We'll be heading to our second to last passage on Ezra this week.

And I'll be reading from verse 1 to 15. Ezra 9. 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.

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.

When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down appalled. 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. 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, and prayed.

[1 : 21] I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great.

Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword in captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today. 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 the sanctuary.

And so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken 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 has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem. But now, our God, what can we say after this?

For we have forsaken the commands 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 that have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.

[2 : 34] 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.

What has happened to us as a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt. And yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved, and have given us a remnant like this.

Shall we then break your commands again and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough of us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?

Lord, the 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.

That is the word of the Lord. I'd just like to invite Barry up. Thank you. It's very good to be back.

[3 : 46] Yeah, lovely to see all of you again. So today's sermon title is No Shame, No Gain. That's probably the closest equivalent I can think of to capture the meaning of my original sermon title in Chinese.

I don't know how many of you have heard of a Chinese proverb called 知耻近乎勇 It translates to Knowing shame is close to courage.

How many of you have heard of this little phrase here, like five characters, 知耻近乎勇 Knowing shame is close to courage. Now do you know who is the author of this phrase?

Our great Chinese philosopher, Confucius. So he tells us that knowing one's own shame can lead to gaining new insights, which will ignite brave, corrective actions.

It's a positive thing, isn't it? So understanding shame in our Western culture, where it is quite seldom discussed, it might be better for us to grasp the meaning by considering the flip side, which is what shamelessness means.

[5 : 06] So in Chinese culture, honor and shame are very significant. Even when we don't openly talk about it, it is in our blood, it's in our DNA.

So when we're faced with shameful acts, we might say, 无耻, 无耻, which means, there's no limits to shamelessness, because there are always more shamelessness.

Now I found this interesting story online about, I think Chinese female workers living in a big dormitory during the work week.

So bear in mind, it is a very different culture and work-life situation. So people, even married couples, may only return home to see their spouse, and family maybe once a week or even less.

And imagine a tiny room, barely 10 square feet, or I mean meters, likely tinier than your bedroom, now shared by three women.

[6 : 19] So one woman frequently, you know, talked on the phone late at night with her husband, you know, which really annoys the other two roommates. But the other two roommates kept silent.

And over time, she begins to even bring her husband to stay overnight in that tiny room. So they were very frustrated, right, the other two.

So they kept silent, they endure it, until they can't take it anymore. And finally, they confronted her. Come on, we have tolerated you, you know, you're chatting so loud every night.

We were thinking, you may be going through some hard times, right? But now having your husband coming over every week, that's too much. What's wrong with you? And you know what's her shocking reply?

She was like, if you manage to find a husband yourself, I dare you to bring him over too. You see, sometimes people just don't recognize their shamelessness.

[7 : 27] Now, today, our Bible story tells us about a group of people who are unfamiliar with God's laws and somewhat behaved shamelessly.

And under Ezra's guidance, they realized that they're wrong and they repented deeply. And perhaps knowing our own shame is the first step towards courage and repentance.

Shall we bow down and pray? Father God, as we dive into your word, we ask the Holy Spirit to give us insight and understanding to really open up our ears to hear your voice directly.

And let us see our sins, our individual sins, more clearly. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So, as we explore the next chapter, chapter 9, we might stumble upon some tough questions.

Clicker. There you go. Like, why was intermarriage with foreign nations considered such a grave sin? And why did Ezra react so strongly, you know, upon knowing these people having marriage with the other groups?

[8 : 47] Wasn't it a bit over the top? And how did Ezra reconcile God's mercy with his justice? Or, if we put it simply, which does God emphasize more?

Is it mercy or judgment? So, today we're going to break down the scripture into five segments and finally we'll reflect collectively on what areas our church might need to think about repentance.

Alright, let's dive in. So, verses 1 to 5 talk about how Ezra discovers the grave sin and the dire situation within Israel.

So, do you remember what happened in chapter 8? So, Ezra was appointed by the king and he's protected by God and he traveled a long journey back to Jerusalem.

So, chapter 9 begins with these words, after these things had been done. I think it refers to his task, you know, that the king has given him to teach God's laws to the Israelites.

[9 : 59] Maybe after a few months of learning God's laws, the people, the community began to see something was really amiss. Something is terribly wrong. So, shortly after Ezra settling in, the community leaders brought cases of severe misconduct before him.

Now, it would involve actions that threatened to disrupt many families. Verse 1 says, the neighboring peoples did their detestable practices.

What does that mean? In ancient times, these included child sacrifices and temple prostitution. Imagine, you know, sacrificing a children.

These are practices, these practices are starkly different from today's mainstream religious norms. So, really horrific and inhumane practice.

That's why they are called detestable. Now, here's where the issues started. Verse 2 tells us they intermarried with the neighboring peoples.

[11 : 11] Now, imagine this. A priest's son gets a new bride, not necessarily out of love, but in a similar way to the traditional Chinese arranged marriage.

And why would, you know, someone marry a foreign woman, you know, from the Canaanites? Could it involve some political benefits? Perhaps her family held a high office in the province, so it may be a match of equal social standing that could bring convenience in the political sense.

When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem, bear in mind, they had become the minority. So, marrying into the dominant cultures can make life much easier and even brings lots of benefits.

So, you might think having a foreign woman in the house is no big deal. but often it's not that simple. Now, if your in-laws insist on playing and placing an idol in their daughter's room, saying, you know, because that's our tradition, we only worship on full moon and new moon, it's not like every day, would you as a priest agree with that?

Would you firmly refuse or turn a blind eye? Oh, maybe, yeah, just let it be, just keep it inside her room, okay? But just don't bring the idol out in the living room.

[12 : 54] We'll be fine. But what if the idol makes its way in the room followed by some rituals? Let's say if the in-laws visit and say, oh, the idol in my daughter's room hasn't been tended for a long time, let us go worship it.

Now, that would lead to an idol worship ceremony right in the priest's home. Big deal. Now, worse still, the kids may follow their mother's footsteps in worshipping the idol.

That would utterly ruin the priest's family. We're Christians, right? Let's imagine if our church has placed some idols or other religious artifacts.

Even just thinking about it is revolting. That's why these practices are called detestable practices. Verse 2 declares that the holy race has mixed with the local peoples.

Holy race refers to God's call in Exodus 19, chapter 19, 6, for Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[14 : 09] This identity was meant to exemplify holiness and lead others to the true God, Yahweh. And instead, their identity was now diluted, their mission forgotten as their foreign customs infiltrated and took root.

So the widespread of intermarriage and the impacts show that the community is not only moving away from his faith, but directly violating God's covenant.

And this disregard has severe consequences, as inevitable as night follows day. Ezra's reaction to this news was profound, knowing very well the legal and spiritual ramifications of these sins.

So how did Ezra react? Let's look at verse 3. When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled.

Now, Ezra, shocked by the news, tore his clothes and yanked out his hair and beard in despair. His actions were so intense, he must have bled.

[15 : 25] those around him, including the leaders who reported the sin to him, sat in silence, overwhelmed by the gravity of their actions and the potential consequences of breaking their covenant with God.

Imagine the scene, not just Ezra, but many others who revered God's words, sitting in silence all day, reflecting deeply what they had done wrong.

They did not eat, drink, or even move. Do you think they were there, Ezra, can we have a toilet break? Impossible.

They just sat there for hours, quietly waiting for God's judgment. Sometimes we would encounter such a great sin within the church.

It's a gut-wrenching experience that affects everyone. maybe we have heard things from the news. Sometimes a church leader fails morally and it brings great shame to the entire church.

[16 : 35] Now this kind of communal grief and dread were palpable among Ezra and the people sitting around him. So as the day turned into evening, when the lambs were traditionally offered in sacrifice according to Moses' law.

Now Ezra, amidst this turmoil, began to pray. His prayer, which we'll study today, profoundly moved many people, leading to a great repentance and revival.

And by the way, how does the Bible say about Ezra's look? It also carries deep meanings. Ezra's disheveled appearance and torn clothes mirrored the spiritual ruin of Israel.

And kneeling and spreading his hands towards Yahweh, he prayed fervently, humbly pleading for mercy. And brothers and sisters, when was the last time we knelt down in deep repentance, crying in front of God for the sin of ourselves and of our community?

Let's continue looking at Ezra's prayer, verse 6. I'm too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

[18 : 09] From the days of our ancestors 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.

Look, Ezra doesn't say, I'm too ashamed because their sins are so many, their sins are so deep.

What does he say? He says, our sins, including himself with everyone else. others. Despite not being personally responsible, he takes on the collective guilt.

Our saying goes, when you point a finger at someone, three fingers are pointing back to you. We often shift blame like Adam and Eve.

Ezra's readiness to share the guilt really shows his deep love for God and his people. He doesn't place himself above others. That is true humility and empathy.

[19 : 22] This leads us to a critical question for us as Christians. Are we ready to love the church through both good times and challenging times, particularly troubled times caused by sin?

Are we ready to walk alongside those who have failed so that we might restore them? Or do we just leave them? Let's continue with verses 8 and 9, acknowledging God's faithful love.

So here we can see Ezra gratefully acknowledging God's mercy towards the remnants of Israel. But now for a brief moment, the Lord our God has been gracious and leaving us a remnant, giving us a firm place in his sanctuary.

This has given us light and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken us. He has shown us kindness in the sight of kings of Persia, granted us a new life to rebuild our God's house and repair his ruins, and provided a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

Now it's very important to clarify the meaning of these walls. You may think, oh, isn't the walls about decades later in the book of Nehemiah?

[20 : 50] Yes, the book of Nehemiah, which focuses on rebuilding the massive city walls, occurs about a decade after Ezra's time. The word used in Ezra's account here is Gadir, which means a simpler barrier, not a large wall homah, Nehemiah describes.

And yet, Ezra is deeply aware of his people's precarious survival. So, reflecting on the past sins and God's judgments, he chooses not to dwell on God's severity, but his grace and steadfast love.

This love, chesed, in the original word, reveals God as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness, echoing in Exodus chapter 34.

The revival of Israelites that currently enjoy is purely by God's mercy, and notice how Ezra uses the word remnants.

It points out that their existence is fragile and unmerited. So, let us remember, brothers and sisters, that every breath and moment of life is a gift of God's mercy.

[22 : 17] We don't merely exist by chance, but by his steadfast love. There's a loving purpose God has put into your life.

The time and the life and the life span are purely his grace and mercy. So, let's not take life for granted and waste it. Let's do something beautiful and meaningful about it.

Shall we? in the next few verses, Ezra revisits the commands given by God.

But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands you gave through your servants, the prophets. You said, the land you are entering is polluted by the corruption of its peoples.

By their detestable practices, they have filled it with impurity. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons.

[23 : 18] 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.

So, Ezra's prayer recalls the mandates in Deuteronomy. It says, now, the Israelites has broken, has breached these laws.

It was clear, they were not to intermarry with the neighboring peoples in order to avoid being led away from Yahweh. However, if you are well versed in the Bible, you might be able to think of a few examples, I mean, exceptions.

Can you think of any? For example, Joseph's wife was an Egyptian. What about Moses himself?

Moses married a Cushite lady as a wife later in his life. wife. What about the book that we have studied together last year? Ruth.

[24 : 26] Ruth, who is a Moabite, and her name is even in Jesus' lineage. And we can even find closer examples to our story in Ezra chapter 6.

If you remember from the sermon a few weeks ago, during the dedication ceremony and the Passover, over, some non-Israelites who sought Yahweh joined the Israelites.

These individuals could join the Israel community through marriage or kinship, ties, but there was one stipulation. They had to purify themselves from the practices of the local peoples, meaning they had to renounce their idols and custom and turn to Yahweh.

So, intermarriage was permissible for those committed to Yahweh. Otherwise, it was forbidden. And Ezra saw the current predicament as a national crisis, risking seduction and possibly a full-blown apostasy.

So, let's examine verses 13 to 15 and understand how big the national crisis is and the implications. What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt.

[25 : 51] Yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we then break your commands again 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? Lord, the 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. So, Ezra clearly understood how serious the consequence would be for the Israelites marrying from other peoples.

They are really risking God's severe wrath. They already had precedence to see. Both the northern and southern kingdoms have suffered destruction for straying away.

And this kind of transgression today would be no exception, even for the remnants. They are facing a total wipe out of their people. And someone might wonder, how could Israel, God's chosen people, face extinction.

[27 : 11] God had promises for them after all, right? In Exodus 32, because Aaron and the people made a golden calf for the people, I mean, for worship, God's anger was kindled.

And he said to Moses, look at these stiff-necked people. Now, leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them.

Then I will make you into a great nation. So, Moses interceded for the Israelites, and God relented, sparing them from disaster.

And look, we shouldn't understand this episode as merely a test for Moses to see whether he's willing to pray for his people. God genuinely had the option to wipe out the Israelites because even raising a new nation through Moses would not have violated his promise to Abraham.

And in the case of the intermarriage events now in Ezra, God could likewise choose to extinguish the Israelites and establish a new nation, and perhaps through Ezra himself.

[28 : 25] We don't know. Anyways, the point is, Ezra knew the possibility of extinction was imminent, and it absolutely could not be ignored.

God's judgment is for real this time. Brothers and sisters, let us understand God properly and rightly.

God is merciful and gracious and not quick to anger, but that doesn't mean he won't get angry. Every time we sin, we think, hey, God will cut us some slack, because he's merciful.

Then we are terribly mistaken. God says he does not leave the guilty unpunished. And we must bear the consequences of our sins as part of God's discipline, because he loves us, as the book of Hebrews teaches us.

But equally, we cannot deny or downplay God's mercy and love. God isn't constantly waiting to check we are sinning and zapping us with lightning.

[29 : 37] That is not the God of Christianity. But do you know someone who understands God like this? I certainly do. If we only see God's mercy and love, we might become lazy and complacent and lax, because we think there is no consequences.

And conversely, if we only see God's punishment and discipline without recognizing his mercy and love, we can become harsh and lacking in compassion.

And how could such a life reflect the true goodness of God? judgment? And some of us may recall James 2.13.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. How do we understand this verse in light of, you know, these things that we are studying? So, let's consider the whole sentence.

For judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment. Now, given the context, this addresses how we should show mercy to other people, mirroring God's loving principles, but not suggesting God will ignore our sins for mercy's sake.

[30 : 58] And remember, those unmerciful will face God's unmerciful judgment. However, over a long stretch of time, God's mercy often prevails.

But in the moment, the single dots of time in judgment, the consequences are deeply felt. And yet, salvation is a cornerstone of our faith, right?

Jesus bore the ultimate punishment, intertwining God's mercy and justice through his crucifixion, which is a profound demonstration of divine love and justice.

This topic is so complex. We could talk about them all day. So, we're just scratching the surface here. So, to truly honor God, we must understand him fully, avoiding partial or extreme viewpoints that misrepresent his true nature as shown in the Bible.

So, one key area the church must address today is our tendency to lean towards either extremes. Some of us have become complacent and let sin infiltrate our lives under the guise of faith.

[32 : 25] Others have portrayed God too harshly, losing the beauty of his beauty or the beauty of his grace. and we must turn away from this narrow mindedness and our selective hearing, which leads us to focus only on the comforting scriptures or conversely on those that judge and reprimand, ignoring the broader aspects of God's character.

While the call to repentance in our churches may not mirror the dire situations faced in the biblical figures like Ezra, it is still very important.

Despite Jesus' assurance that the universal church will withstand Satan's assaults, individual congregations are not immune to sin's impacts.

So, Matthew chapter 18 outlines the proper steps for addressing sin within the church. So, it starts with a one-on-one conversation then involves more people if necessary then escalates to the church level when needed.

Some sins are caught early, with wrongdoers acknowledging their faults leading to reconciliation and praise the Lord. However, other situations escalate requiring church intervention to address serious misconduct.

[33 : 58] aspects. As we study the book of Ezra, we can't avoid discussing sin and repentance. So, I think a few weeks ago, Pastor Albert, at a Wednesday's prayer meeting, he invited brothers and sisters to write down areas that our church needs to pay attention to and perhaps repent for.

So, allowing us, you know, to really pray for those things. And I have summarized them into five points for us to reflect and repent upon.

And firstly, it turns out some of us are prideful and self-centered, having heard our brothers and sisters with our words. forgiveness. Second, it turns out some of us lack love and forgiveness and are unwilling to reconcile with each other.

Third, it turns out some of us are disobedient to leaders, disrespectful to parents, and frankly, do not recognize authority or show proper respect to the church leaders.

others. And fourth, it turns out some of us are indifferent to God and lack pursuit in faith, living in a faith that is merely superficial and we don't have the earnestness for faith.

[35 : 33] And fifth, it turns out some of us are hypocrites. We present one face to other people but behave differently in private.

Now, each of these points could be a sermon in itself, so we can't spend more time detailing them. And instead, we hope the Holy Spirit moves us even to distress, making us aware of our own sins and leading us to repentance.

And at this moment, I would like to invite us to bow our heads and let's learn to pray like Ezra. Our God, our Heavenly Father, we feel so ashamed because of our sins and transgressions.

We can't even lift our faces to you for our sins are grave. From day one of our church to today, many sins have never left us and they keep dragging our feet and hindering our spiritual renewal.

And yet, our God, our Lord, you have shown us mercy, allowing us to flourish in East Auckland, treating us with faithful love and bountiful grace.

[37 : 00] But we often disappoint you. Some of us are arrogant and our careless words hurt those around us. Some of us lack love and forgiveness and we are slow to reconcile with our brothers and sisters.

Some of us have become disobedient to leaders, disrespectful to parents, openly defying your clear teachings in the Bible. And some of us have our hearts turned stone cold towards you and we lack passion for faith for we let worldly things occupy our hearts, unknowingly distancing ourselves from you.

And the most terrifying thing is our hypocrisy. We appear devout but inside we are corrupt and you see it all too clearly.

Lord, yet you have treated us mercifully, dealing gently with our transgressions, allowing our church to stand firm even today. Lord, among us are still the stubborn and hard-hearted.

Will you let us go unpunished? Our Lord, our Heavenly Father, you are entirely just. We stand sinful before you and if not for Jesus' salvation, none could stand before you.

[38 : 26] as we reflect and realize we still live in sin and impurity, all we can do is sit in dismay like Ezra, waiting for your discipline.

So, Lord, may you soften our hearts, let us repent from our waywardness. As far as the east is from the west, so far have you removed our transgressions from us.

And thank you, Lord Jesus, for you have cleansed us of all our sins with your precious blood. In your mighty name we pray. Amen.