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## EZRA: FAITH AND ACTION PREACHER

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Lesson Scripture: Ezra 9-10

Focus Scripture: Ezra 10:1-12

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*Key Verse: "O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed 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."*

*Ezra 9:6 (NRSV)*

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### EZRA 10:1-12 (NRSV)

1 While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly.

2 Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra, saying, "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.

3 So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

4 Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong, and do it."

5 Then Ezra stood up and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear that they would do as had been said. So they swore.

6 Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God, and went to the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib, where he spent the night. He did not eat bread or drink water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

7 They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem,

8 and that if any did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all their property should be forfeited, and they themselves banned from the congregation of the exiles.

9 Then all the people of Judah and Benjamin

### EZRA 10:1-12 (KJV)

1 Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.

2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.

3 Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

4 Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.

5 Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware.

6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

7 And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem;

8 And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be



assembled at Jerusalem within the three days; it was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. All the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel.

11 Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

12 Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, "It is so; we must do as you have said."

forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain.

10 And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel.

11 Now therefore make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

12 Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.

### KEY TERMS

- **Confession** – Admitting that one is guilty of a crime; acknowledgment or disclosure of sin or sinfulness.
- **Exile** – A period of absence from one's homeland, often imposed as a form of punishment. The OT regards Israel's exile in Babylon as a form of divine punishment.

### INTRODUCTION

This scripture passage presents the priest, Ezra, confronting the serious concern of the disobedience of God's people, in particular the violation of intermarriage with foreign women. Chapter 9 presents his exhaustive expression of mourning for the people's sins. The act of confession is found not only in the Old Testament but is encouraged in letters to the early Christian communities (James

5:16, 1 John 1:9). As found in chapter 10, the story illustrates that unlike other prophets, Ezra does not face resistance from the people in correcting their wrongs. As the people gather to hear the priest, they recognize that they have committed a grave error, and must now correct their wrong.

As a priest, Ezra wears the mantle of responsibility along with a cloak of shame for his people. His anguish is apparent and graphically displayed in his actions, intentionally drawing the attention of men, women, and children. Ezra creates a stage in which he can now address the congregation and present the extent of their plight and dire consequences that they may encounter.

Ezra declares the action needed to rebuild the sanctity of the priesthood and address the contamination of the holy



seed is to divorce from foreign wives. The cost is great because the women and children involved in these acts must return to their countries without fathers and husbands. But the people appear willing to make things right in the eyes of God. The sacrifice of losing their loved ones would not be an immediate sentence. Instead they agree to phase the exiled members over time, allowing them to prepare for what lies ahead.

The story reinforces the understanding that mistakes have consequences which are often painful and even generational. It is likely that the women and children will feel the pain of this edict for generations to come.

What this text teaches us is that God's people must always confront their fallen behavior and make amends to repent. Continuing down the path of sin leads to further destruction. As a priest, Ezra actively intercedes for the people in prayer and leads them on a path that is in line with God's covenant and commands.

### TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Ezra displays his grief and anguish

over the people's disobedience. Once the people are informed, they are equally bereaved at the thought that they have gone down the path that led to their ancestors' demise. Restoring purity to the priesthood would be costly.

Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible and the last of those traditionally ascribed to Moses. Its name is derived from the Greek word

*deuteronomion* which means "second law" or "repeated law." The book itself is characterized as the inspired and authoritative "polity" or political constitution given by Moses, since Moses was unable to enter the promised land. It is a surrogate, the replacement for Moses, who is unable to speak to them, once they pass into the new land.

The story reinforces the understanding that mistakes have consequences which are often painful and even generational.

Chapter four is preceded by Moses' historical outline of the Exodus. The preceding also provides a description of the events that followed the Mount Horeb incident where the people disobeyed God. It is the chief lesson that reminds them that their obedience and strict observance of the law is the determining factor of their well-being. This section



captures the essence of their obligation to God, as well as reminders of their past wanderings and even failings in battles with other nations. Resist all temptations and serve God and God alone.

Discipline shapes their witness and theology. God's demands are both authoritative and complete. If Israel follows God's commands and statutes, it will become and remain a great nation. The narrative outlines God's promise that Israel's prudent obedience to their God will bring them high acclaim and great respect.

### SANKOFA

*One who relates with a corrupt person likewise gets corrupted. ~ Kenyan Proverb*

This Kenyan proverb is found in many cultures. It warns of association with people who practice high risk behavior or criminal activity, which will ultimately lead their associates down the same path. This advice is often used to place boundaries around children, preventing them from being lured and tempted into deviant activity that could lead to their demise. In modern times, it is difficult to control

and prevent a young person's exposure to dangerous imagery. By constant interaction through social media and the internet, nothing is censored. People of unknown origins and intentions have been known to attract vulnerable minds into traps ranging from money scams and human trafficking to gangs and even terrorist groups. Corruption does not require international espionage or extreme illegal activities. The perversion most common is arrogance and insensitivity, blatant

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disregard of others, ignoring others' rights, prejudicial biases, hateful language, and lack of compassion. Immorality can occur in areas considered harmless and safe, such as schools, churches, and healthcare facilities. Examples can range from plagiarism and cheating to misappropriation of funds. Depravity can occur at any level. In government, it is key to have checks and balances, and experts

who actively test for ethical conduct. The consequences can be great for even associating with someone involved in illegal or immoral behavior. More importantly, they are an offense to the laws of God. It is best to follow the wise Kenyan proverb. Avoid association with



dishonest people at any level.

### CASE STUDY

As a racial group and unique culture of the African diaspora, African Americans have been given various names and labels. However, there are an even more abundant list of names for those who reflect other racial influences in either their hair, skin tone, or facial features. From the time of slavery, mixed race Africans were labeled differently, creating a disparity between their African brothers and sisters, but never accepted within the white majority group. Leah Donella shared her experiences as a mixed-race black woman in America. In her blog, she first lists the multitude of names that she and other fair-skinned blacks might be associated with over the course of American history. They include muwalladeen, mulattos, mestizos, mestiços, blended, biracial, interracial, multiracial, multiethnic, gray, high yellow, half-breed, mixed-breed, cross-breed, mutt, mongrel, mixed blood, mixed race, mixed heritage, quadroon, octoroon, hapa, pardo, and sambo. This is just a small example of the tragedy of racism, and its ability to disparage

the African heritage. Where does the light-skinned or the dark-skinned black person belong in their own community? For Leah, the question she posed was, "What does one call oneself?" Leah faced that question throughout her life but came to the conclusion of the power in her multiethnic beauty. Here are her thoughts on this matter:

Leah faced that question throughout her life but came to the conclusion of the power in her multiethnic beauty.

"As an African American woman who hails a heritage of African, European, and Native American people, there had been no shortage of inquiries of 'What are you?', or 'Are one of your parents white?' The dilemma that many African Americans still struggle with is the ability to embrace their multiethnicity without having to explain. There is no doubt that the multi shades of melanin that bask the Black communities throughout the Americas are a result of not only the horrors of rapes on the plantations but also love encounters during Jim Crow. So, what do we say to these things? If we are to progress and achieve a level of equality that shatters the disparities in this country



and beyond to our Motherlands, we should accept the historical narratives that make us the shades of ebony to cocoa to vanilla. It is critical to the evolution of Black people to realize the common thread of having African ancestors. From the 12 million African slaves that were brought to the Americas between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the majority would reside, not in the U.S. but in South America and the Caribbean. Therefore, destiny was intended to find strength in our diversity. From Africa to Finland, to Brazil to the coast of California, there is no mistaking the magnificent beauty, strong resilience, and unmistakable determination of the people of African descent.”

### LIFE APPLICATION

Interracial marriage in the United States became fully legal in all of the U.S. states when the 1967 Supreme Court decision deemed anti-miscegenation state laws unconstitutional. However, a person’s racial origins do not determine their character, nor their moral compass. Throughout the Bible, God selected a servant that often did not fit the traditions of humans. Instead, God looks at the heart of men and women. He examines our thoughts and minds to determine our allegiance to him or to the idol materials

of this world. The threat to every human being is to guard against temptations that can lead individuals away from God. There are benefits to avoiding environments and people that are unhealthy and self-destructive. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

### QUESTIONS

1. What can your local church do to change stereotypes about cultural groups in your community?
2. How can the local church begin embracing diversity?
3. What are some of the obstacles in bridging relationships with other cultural groups and why?

### CLOSING DEVOTIONS

**Closing Hymn or Song of Praise:** “Give Me a Clean Heart”

**Closing Prayer:** Create in me a clean heart, O God, and plant a fresh spirit of righteousness within me. Please God, do not ignore my prayers or discard or reject me from being in your presence. God, I sincerely pray that you never remove your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Oh Lord, I know that I am not worthy of your love. But you are a loving and merciful God. Mold me into your image. Fill me with your sweet spirit. Cover me with your loving arms, so that I will not fall prey to the temptations

of this world. I pray not only for me, but for my family, friends, our local church, and the community. Change our hearts, oh

God, so that we may follow you. Amen.

Written by Rev. Dr. D. Melynda Clarke; a prayer inspired by Psalm 51.

### HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

April 5-April 11

<b>Monday</b>	Acts 26:19-23 (A Light to Jews and Gentiles)
<b>Tuesday</b>	Ephesians 4:17-24 (Live the New Life in Christ)
<b>Wednesday</b>	Leviticus 18:24-30 (Keep Land Faithful to Godly Practices)
<b>Thursday</b>	Zechariah 7:8-14 (Ignoring God's Laws Leads to Judgment)
<b>Friday</b>	Nehemiah 7:73b-8:6 (People Anxious to Hear the Law)
<b>Saturday</b>	Nehemiah 8:9-12 (People Respond Actively to the Law)
<b>Sunday</b>	Ezra 10:1-12 (Committed to a Life of Obedience)