

## Ezra: Faith and Action Preacher

**H**e's doing what!?" Jordan asked his sister.

"He said it's going to be a business investment," said Natalie.

"A strip club!" interjected Jordan.

"He says he's going to make it a sports bar with 'entertainment,' " continued his sister.

Tyler was their younger brother, who wanted to be a businessperson. He had tried to get involved in a few questionable ventures—but never one this distasteful. Jordan had been the older, stable brother, trying to help his younger siblings get on, and stay on, the right path.

Jordan was most concerned with Tyler because of his wandering and mischievous ways. Jordan could not bear to think of the "business" that Tyler was trying to purchase. His brother had strayed away from the God-fearing young man he once was.

Over the next week, Jordan fervently prayed and also fasted for his brother. At the end of the week, Tyler called his big brother, and he asked to see Jordan for "some help."

"This business deal seems to be going south, big brother, and I would like a loan that I will pay back when I can," asked Tyler.

"Tyler, you know I'm not going to support you in this unholy venture," said Jordan. "I have been praying for you and will continue to pray that you follow Christ and the things of God."

**1.** *Describe a time when you acted the way God wanted you to—but it was very difficult.*

**2.** *Why is it often costly for us to follow God's ways?*

**3.** *Why is it better to follow God's ways?*

## Ezra Mourns, the People Confess

*Ezra 10:1-6, 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 swear.

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

*Ezra 10:1-6, NIV*

<sup>1</sup>While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly. <sup>2</sup>Then Shekariah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. <sup>3</sup>Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. <sup>4</sup>Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.”

<sup>5</sup>So Ezra rose up and put the leading priests and Levites and all Israel under oath to do what had been suggested. And they took the oath. <sup>6</sup>Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there,

*KJV*

water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

*NIV*

he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.

Ezra 10 opens with Ezra in the court of the temple, mourning Israel's sin. He not only prayed but confessed the people's sin before God—he wept and threw himself down in front of the temple. As he did this, “a large crowd of Israelites . . . gathered around him. They too wept bitterly” (vs. 1). Ezra's sorrow became a godly sorrow among all the people.

The priest Shekaniah—whose father Jehiel, as well as several of his uncles, were likely among those who had married foreign women (vs. 26)—spoke for the people, acknowledging their sin but also acknowledging God's willingness to forgive if they repented. He suggested making a covenant before God “to send away all these women and their children . . . according to the Law” (vs. 3). He concluded, “Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it” (vs. 4).

The response from everyone concerned was both immediate and decisive: “Ezra rose up and put the leading priests and Levites and all Israel under oath to do what had been suggested” (vs. 5). Likewise, the entire nation (with a handful of exceptions, vs. 15) took this oath before God.

However, Ezra did not consider his work finished. He left the temple, and “went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib” (vs. 6). Eliashib was high priest during Ezra and Nehemiah's time, and Jehohanan became high priest later; thus, it is likely that this room was near or even connected to the temple. Once there, Ezra “continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles,” and took neither food nor water. Ezra continued to take the lead in the people's repentance.

**4.** *What did Ezra do at the beginning of this passage? How did he do it?*

**5.** *How did the people respond? What did they suggest doing?*

**6.** *What did Ezra do after the people repented?*

## The People Recommit to God's Ways

*Ezra 10:7-12, KJV*

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 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.

*Ezra 10:7-12, NIV*

<sup>7</sup>A proclamation was then issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem.

<sup>8</sup>Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property, in accordance with the decision of the officials and elders, and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles. <sup>9</sup>Within the three days, all the men of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. And on the twentieth day of the ninth month, all the people were sitting in the square before the house of God, greatly distressed by the occasion and because of the rain. <sup>10</sup>Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. <sup>11</sup>Now honor the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives."

<sup>12</sup>The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: "You are right! We must do as you say."

Ezra not only mourned, he exercised his authority as priest as well as the civil authority given him by King Artaxerxes. He issued a proclamation for “all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem. Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property . . . and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles” (vss. 7-8). He took legal measures to ensure that the oath the people had made would be kept. The men of Judah needed to choose either to obey or to disobey, and to make their decision quickly.

This proclamation had its desired effect. All the men of Judah and Benjamin (comprising the former southern kingdom of Judah) arrived in Jerusalem, distressed not only physically because of the rain but because of the situation itself (vs. 9). In 458 B.C., the 20th day of the ninth month (Kislev) was well into December. The rainy season had begun in October; its heaviest rains came in December and January.

Thankfully, the response of Judah and Benjamin was not one of rebellion but of willingness as well as fear, not only of legal repercussion but of the judgment of God Himself.

Ezra repeated his accusation against the men of Judah: “You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel’s guilt. Now honor the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives” (vss. 10-11). Repentance not only required the men ceasing to do what they had done but undoing the sin they had committed.

The men’s response was loudly positive: “You are right! We must do as you say” (vs. 12). About ten days later, the officials of each of the towns of Judah “sat down to investigate the cases, and by the first day of the first month [three months later] they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women” (vss. 16-17).

**7.** *How did Ezra ensure that the people would keep their oath?*

**8.** *What did Ezra tell the men of Judah about their actions, and what they needed to do next?*

**9.** *How did the men of Judah respond?*

## Obedience Despite the Cost

We have all heard how difficult it is to serve and obey God in countries like Iran. But it has been reported that the number of Christians in Iran is still growing rapidly—some believe there may be close to one million Christians there. How could this occur in a nation that will torture, persecute, and even kill you because of your religious beliefs?

Any Christian gathering in Iran is illegal, and church leaders risk being arrested and imprisoned, but Christians still gather in private homes, parks, even taxis, to worship Jesus. If they are found to be a Christian, they know they will be told to renounce their faith and return to Islam, or suffer terrible consequences—but they obey the Lord anyway.

Obedying the Lord also cost Barbara and James. They were living well in their small Midwestern city in a luxurious house with a pool and sauna. Barbara was head of accounting in a large farm business, where James also worked as the top salesman. Because of their six-figure incomes, their boys attended a private school, and the family vacationed every year on the Mexican coast or in Hawaii.

But everything came crashing down when Barbara discovered serious errors in the company tax reporting. When she passed on her findings, she was told to keep quiet—but she didn't. Her Christian conscience wouldn't allow it. She and James were suddenly fired, rumors circulated that Barbara had mismanaged company funds, and she and James were virtually forced to leave town. They found themselves living in a small rented house on less than a third of their old salaries, but neither of them regretted what she had done. The cost of disobedience to God would have been much higher.

**10.** *Can you count the cost of following God in advance? Explain your answer.*

**11.** *Why do we often think of material costs before we think of the spiritual costs of not following Him?*

**12.** *Why does God often require a large cost to follow Him and not a "little" one?*

## That It May Be Well with You

Our actions must represent God, no matter what. God's way is the perfect and prosperous way, but not always the popular or easy way. But when we walk with Him, we reject ungodly side paths and obey what He says to do so that, as Deuteronomy 5:33 says, "it may be well with you" (KJV).

► *Write a prayer that expresses your desire to follow God's way, no matter the personal cost. You may want to read Deuteronomy 5:33 and Psalm 1:1-2 and use them as a guide for your prayer.*

### KEY VERSE

[Ezra] said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. —Ezra 9:6, KJV

[Ezra] prayed: "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." —Ezra 9:6, NIV

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

#### Week of April 12 through April 18

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Daniel 9:4-6, 15-19—Daniel Intercedes for Jerusalem.
- Tues.** Nehemiah 13:4-9—Nehemiah Orders Temple Cleansing and Restoration.
- Wed.** Nehemiah 13:10-14—Nehemiah Restores Ministries of Levites, Singers.
- Thurs.** Nehemiah 13:15-22—Nehemiah Reforms Sabbath Observances and Practices.
- Fri.** Nehemiah 13:23-27—Nehemiah Sets Standards for Jewish Marriages.
- Sat.** Nehemiah 2:1-10—Nehemiah Sent to Rebuild Jerusalem.
- Sun.** Nehemiah 2:11-20—Nehemiah Inspires the People to Rebuild.