



Ezra: Faith and Action Preacher

Lesson Overview

Week of April 11

1 Life Need:

Discuss what it means to count the cost of following God.

2 Bible Learning:

Read about Ezra's boldness in telling the people they must obey God's command.

Suggested Material:

■ *Adult Teacher's Resource Kit:* Poster and reproducible handout: Exile and Restoration

3 Bible Application:

Explore how taking a godly stand requires faith, action, and often sacrifice.

Suggested Material:

■ *Adult Teacher's Resource Kit:* Reproducible handout: No Matter the Cost

4 Life Response:

Live God's way, every day.

Church/Home Theme:
Revive Us Again,
O Lord!

Lesson Focus:
Act according to
God's ways, no
matter the cost.

Lesson Scripture:
Ezra 10:1-12

Humble Service—Ezra was a man who boldly represented God and His principles. He desired the Lord's words and ways to be acknowledged, then followed. On one occasion, Ezra humbly threw himself on the ground, bowing before the Lord in the temple. He confessed and sorrowed deeply for the sin of God's people. While Ezra lamented, several visitors in the temple gathered around him, and they too began to weep, fearing God's wrath.

While observing Ezra, Shekariah (KJV: Shecheniah), a pious man who may have traveled with Ezra from Babylon, spoke out. He realized the seriousness of the nation's sin—specifically, the Jewish men taking foreign wives. Shekariah suggested the sending away (divorcing) of the non-Jewish wives to preserve the moral and spiritual welfare of God's people. This act demonstrated brokenness over their disobedience and also genuine repentance. Their repentance indicated hope, as the people started weeping over their sin and determined to do something about it.

Decisive Action—Ezra agreed to Shekariah's counsel. Even though this much had been accomplished, Ezra continued his mourning by entering into a strict fast. After Ezra met with the princes and elders, the entire congregation had to gather within three days. The leadership sent messengers to proclaim the urgent meeting. The absent individuals risked suffering heavy penalties. Therefore, the majority of Jewish men gathered at Jerusalem in the pouring rain to show their determination to please the Lord. Ezra ordered the men to break all ties with any of their foreign family and friends. The audience loudly agreed.

Ezra pulled no punches. He wanted the Lord's name and commandments to be upheld. Only quick and decisive action by the people would solve their problem.

As Your Students Arrive

Ask your students how often they consider the cost when they buy things. Is price always most important, or are there some things they are willing to pay more for because they are higher quality, are more reliable when used, or are made locally? Counting the cost is an important part of this week's lesson as we look at the cost of following God every day.

Link to Last Week: Some of your students may want to tell how they shared God’s message of salvation and redemption with someone this past week.

1 Life Need

Discuss what it means to count the cost of following God.

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“He’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?

LESSON FOCUS: Act according to God’s ways, no matter the cost.

Read the story in the student book, then have the students form small groups to discuss their answers to Questions 1, 2, and 3.

For Question 1, students may remember a time, for example, when they held their tongue in a tense situation in spite of very much wanting to say something that God would not want them to say. They may also have not gone with friends to do something that was inappropriate for a follower of the Lord.

Question 2 reminds students that God’s ways are not the ways of the world. Not following the crowd when it includes close friends, or standing for God on an issue where many people disagree with you, may cost you relationships, time, and money.

Lastly, for Question 3, students may say that following God’s ways brings peace, satisfaction, and contentment in a way that nothing else can. Because they are pleasing God, they are doing the right thing for themselves as well.

2 Bible Learning

Read about Ezra's boldness in telling the people they must obey God's command.



Before starting this step, put up the poster "Exile and Restoration" from the Resource Kit and make copies

of the handout that goes with it. You will use the poster and the handout today and in the next two lessons. Read the first three paragraphs on the handout, then note on the poster the engraving of the exiles rebuilding the temple and the photo of a fresco from an ancient synagogue showing Ezra holding a scroll to read to the people.

EZRA MOURNS, THE PEOPLE CONFESS

Read Ezra 10:1-6 with students and discuss the following points:

- Ezra prayed and wept bitterly in

BIBLE EXTRA

Ezra

After the conquest of Babylon by the Persians, the Jews who had been exiled as much as 70 years earlier began returning to Israel. The first wave of returning exiles, led by King David's descendant Zerubbabel, arrived in Jerusalem around 537 B.C. and soon began rebuilding the temple. Ezra described these efforts in Ezra 1-6, although he himself did not come to Israel until the second wave of migration, around 458 B.C. (His counterpart, Nehemiah, arrived with the third and final wave about a dozen years later.)

As scribe and priest, Ezra ensured that the people followed God's ways; in addition, King Artaxerxes of Persia had given him considerable civil authority (Ezra 7:11-26). Ezra 7:6-10 describes Ezra coming to teach the people—and he soon confronted them about the sin of intermarriage with women of the surrounding nations.

front of the temple because of the sin of Israel in marrying foreign wives.

- While he was praying, a huge crowd of men, women, and children gathered around, weeping in repentance. Shekariah was acting as spokesman.
- Shekariah proclaimed that they betrayed God by marrying foreign wives. He announced that there was still hope, and they would renew their covenant with God.
- To keep that covenant, they would send away

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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 Shekariah 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

Ezra 10:1-6, NIV

¹While 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. ²Then 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. ³Now 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. ⁴Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it."

⁵So 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. ⁶Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there,



Further commentary on this Scripture passage can be found on pp. 748-750 in *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament*.

these foreign wives and children.

- Ezra then left the temple area and began fasting and mourning for Israel’s transgression.

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 4

Ezra went to the outer court of the temple and openly mourned Israel’s sin. He not only prayed against their sin of marrying foreign women but confessed it before God. We also see that Ezra’s prayer was unabashedly emotional, as he was “weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God” (vs. 1).

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 5

Shekariah, whose own family was likely guilty of this sin, called the people to make a covenant before God “to send away all these women and their children . . . according to the Law” (vs. 3). The response 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. And they took the oath” (vs. 5).

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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 Shekariah—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?

BIBLE EXTRA

The Sin of Intermarriage

Marriage with “foreign women” was a huge issue for the Israelites. In this specific case, these women came from the nations the Israelites had conquered in order to enter the promised land. Thus, the question was not one of race or ethnicity; rather, what was at issue was that marrying women from these lands “will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you” (Deut. 7:4).

The New Testament also supports this principle: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers . . . what fellowship can light have with darkness? . . . Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:14-15). Our hearts are to be connected fully to God, not to those whose beliefs and practices would pull us away from Him.

BIBLE EXTRA

‘Sending Away’ Women and Children

While these measures seem harsh to us today, God’s laws had been known to the Israelites since the days of Moses, about a thousand years earlier. In light of the evidence, it can be assumed that the “foreign women” of Ezra’s time had chosen not to follow God but remain in their pagan ways. And since roughly 25 percent of those listed in Ezra 10:18-44 were religious leaders, this was an especially serious crime.

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 6

Although the people had publicly repented and taken an oath before God, Ezra did not consider his work finished. He left the temple, and “went to the room of Jehohanan son of [the high priest] Eliashib” (vs. 6). Once there, Ezra “continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles,” and took neither food nor water. He continued to repent and intercede on the people’s behalf.

THE PEOPLE RECOMMIT TO GOD’S WAYS

Finally, read Ezra 10:7-12 and review the following:

- A notice giving exiles three days to meet in Jerusalem as commissioned by the officials and elders was given. If the children of captivity didn’t adhere to the

call, their land would be taken and they would be expelled from the exile community.

- All the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered within the three days in Jerusalem. They were distressed because of the weather and the purpose of the gathering.

- Ezra boldly stood up and reminded the people of their transgression of marrying foreign women.

- He called on them to change their ways and honor God by separating from the non-Jews around them.

- In response, the people repented and obeyed Ezra’s (and God’s) request.

BIBLE EXTRA

The Rest of the Story

The committee that was formed to investigate the marriages was a group of elders and respected mediators who examined each case of intermarriage and worked out the details of the separations. Four men of note, including one Levite, opposed the system (vs. 15). Their reasons are not given. Perhaps they had intermarried. Perhaps they thought the remedy too drastic.

But the plan was adopted. Ezra appointed the panel to assess each offensive marriage. Every clan was represented. The interviews with those whose marriages had to be reviewed started 10 days after the mass assembly in the rain and lasted for three months—that is, until March 27, 457 B.C. (vss. 16-17). In all, 110 men were found guilty of marrying foreign wives and were required to separate from them (see vss. 18-44). The priests, Levites, and temple personnel headed the list of 110 men who had offended God by marrying foreign wives. The pledge and the guilt offering they made (vs. 19) probably was the same response required of the others on the list. Nine of the original 33 families that returned from Babylon were involved in this offense (vss. 18-44).

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

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

⁸Anyone 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. ⁹Within 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. ¹⁰Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel’s guilt. ¹¹Now honor the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives.”

¹²The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: “You are right! We must do as you say.”

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 7

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] be expelled from the assembly” (vss. 7-8). As a result, all the men of Judah and Benjamin arrived in Jerusalem, distressed not only physically because of the rain but because of the threat of God’s judgment.

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 8

He repeated his accusation against the men of Judah: “You have been unfaithful . . . adding to Israel’s guilt” (vs. 10). And again, he called them

to “Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives” (vs. 11). Repentance required separation—not only from future sin but from the sin they had already committed.

SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 9

The men responded to Ezra positively and loudly: “You are right! We must do as you say” (vs. 12). From the remainder of Ezra 10, we know that the people’s actions reinforced their words: the officials of each of the towns of Judah investigated these cases, and within three months “they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women” (vss. 16-17).

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?

BIBLE EXTRA

Ezra’s Fast

Ezra cloistered himself in a temple chamber and initiated a total fast. His fast was more severe than most fasts recorded in the Bible. Only Moses and the Ninevites abstained from both food and drink as did Ezra (see Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:18; Jonah 3:7).

WINDOW ON THE WORD

God’s Ways

God’s ways are not like our ways. God’s ways are higher, more wise, greater, unexplainable, and precise. God’s ways are superior, advanced, and elevated. Isaiah 55:8-9 says, “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’”

You cannot lose eternally if you follow the ways of God. God’s ways are written in His Word and modeled for us in His Son Jesus. As 1 John 2:6 says, when we follow Jesus we should “walk, even as he walked” (KJV).

3 Bible Application

Explore how taking a godly stand requires faith, action, and often sacrifice.

Photocopy this page and give instructions to each group. Make copies of the handout from the Resource Kit and give those copies to the group using it.



Handout:

'No Matter the Cost'

Read the story and the instructions on the sheet, then share your answers to the questions with the rest of your group.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Discussion Group

Read "Obedience Despite the Cost" and answer **Questions 10, 11, and 12**. Standing for God and His righteousness has consequences, but believers must be bold and courageous. The cost of following God is always all in, not partway in. We may try to set boundaries and say, "I'll follow You if You don't make me do X," but that is not what a true disciple says. We often look at temporal costs first (losing money, friends, etc.) because those are what we see first. Jesus paid an extreme cost, not a "little" one, for following the Father, and His first disciples paid a high cost as well.

Obeying God's Commands

In your small group, research the Word and make a list of what God calls us to do that can come at a cost to us. For instance, Luke 10:27 records Jesus saying we should "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Both of those are difficult things to do but essential to do if we are to follow Him, as well as to love our enemies, not hold grudges against others, etc.

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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?

4 Life Response

Live God's way, every day.

Ask your students to read in their books “That It May Be Well with You” and create the prayer described there. They may want to write their own versions of Deuteronomy 5:33 or Psalm 1:1-2 to create that prayer—for example, “I will walk in all the way which the LORD my God has commanded me, that it may be well with me” (Deut. 5:33, KJV, paraphrased), or, “May I not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers, but instead delight

in the law of the LORD and meditate on His commands day and night” (Ps. 1:1-2, paraphrased).

Close the class in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to guide each of us to follow the Lord's path, regardless of the cost, that we may be His humble servants this week and in the weeks and months to come.

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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.



As the class members are leaving, hand out copies of this week's *Power for Living*. Take or mail copies of *Lesson Leaflet* to those who couldn't be with you today, or send them to those you would like to join your class.

Before Teaching Next Week's Lesson

Before next week, read Nehemiah 2:11-20. Bring to class either some kind of building blocks (wood or plastic) or a puzzle so that the class can build something.