

Ezra 10

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that though we are sinners and we sin against you in so many ways, we have a God who is able and willing and ever ready to forgive us.

We thank you that as we come to you in repentance and faith, you gladly grant to us the forgiveness that only you can grant.

And we thank you for that, how we stand in need of your mercy, how we stand in need of your grace towards us. And we acknowledge that and we thank you for it.

We pray that you would help us as we turn to your word this evening, as we consider the matter of your people who had rebelled against you in one particular manner.

We thank you for how, as your word was proclaimed to them, they came under conviction of sin.

And we read of this heartfelt desire, indeed this urgency to repent, to change, and to enjoy fellowship with you once again.

[1 : 25] And though the circumstances of the sin that they were guilty of seem perhaps quite strange to us, a very different period in history, a very different circumstances to the circumstances we live in.

And we do recognize that there are core biblical gospel principles that we can draw from this account. And we do pray that you would help us to do so in a manner that is clear, in a manner that does justice to your word, directed by your spirit.

So help us as we turn to your word this evening. We do commend to you all that the week ahead holds. We pray your blessing on each of us with whatever it is that you have for us.

For some, it will be another week of work and responsibilities of one kind or another. For others, it may be study or other duties.

We pray that you would be with us, help us in all that we do to serve you and to be a witness for you. Heavenly Father, we do pray then for the week ahead and ask that you would go before us in all things and that we would look to you in all things.

[2 : 41] And bless us then as we turn to your word now this evening and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. How can a chapter that relates how Ezra dealt with the thorny matter of intermarriage between the returning Jewish exiles and women from the surrounding pagan peoples provide any kind of suitable material for a sermon preparing us for participation in the Lord's Supper?

It doesn't seem very promising material. And to be honest with you, when I was thinking about this evening's service and I was conscious that it was a communion service, my initial thought, my kind of default position was, well, we'll leave Ezra to one side and I'll look for some more suitable passage that we can preach on and then we'll come back to Ezra.

That was kind of what I had anticipated doing. But as I thought a little bit more about it, I came to the conclusion that the chapter could provide a suitable message for this evening.

You can be the judge of that in due course. But let me just maybe explain that or in due course, hopefully that will become clear. You know, our feeling about this chapter could be, well, the events that are recorded here are historical events.

They have a measure of significance in the history of God's people. And so, it's right and proper that they should be there for us. But the question that maybe we would have is, yes, but where's the gospel here?

[4 : 19] You know, where's Jesus? Just two or three weeks ago, was it, I was preaching in Kilmally. And on the pulpit there in the church in Kilmally, there are some words engraved on the pulpit, but that are facing the preacher.

So, they're not visible to the congregation, they're visible only to the preacher. And of course, if you're a visiting preacher, you see them for the first time when you step into the pulpit. And the

words that are engraved in the pulpit are as follows, sir, we want to see Jesus.

Or words to that effect. I can't remember the exact words, but words to that effect, we want to see Jesus. Of course, the idea is that that's what the congregation is saying to the preacher. You know, you're there in the pulpit, well, your job is to tell us about Jesus.

Jesus. And so, in the light of this chapter, you know, I pose the question, can we see Jesus in Ezra chapter 10? Are there even glimpses of the gospel in a chapter where perhaps many of us are left just a little uncomfortable with the way that the foreign women and indeed their children appear to be treated?

The treatment that is meted out to them does appear quite harsh as, you know, the problem that has been created by the Jewish men is resolved in some fashion.

[5 : 41] And so, again, I say, you know, where's the gospel in this account? It's true. It's a record of what happened. By all means, it needs to be there, but where do we see the gospel in it?

That's the question. I think we'll find that the answer to those questions, can we see Jesus and is the gospel to be found in this chapter or in these events, the answer to both questions is yes, we can see Jesus.

And indeed, there are more than just glimpses of the gospel in this somewhat forbidding chapter. And we can divide the chapter in a way that does justice both to the account itself, as we have it in the text, but also in a way that provides a framework from which we can see clearly, I hope, the gospel, the good news for a broken world.

And so, the manner in which we're going to divide the material is as follows. First of all, to identify and comment on, note, a big problem that there is that Ezra and indeed the others are seeking to deal with.

So, you have a big problem. But then in the context of this big problem, there is a glimmer of hope. And indeed, to call it a glimmer of hope is maybe downplaying it somewhat.

[6 : 53] There is this declaration, this confident affirmation by one individual declaring that there is hope.

Yes, things have gone badly awry, but there is hope. So, you have got problem, a big problem, but there is also this glimmer of hope. And then thirdly, what you have in the chapter really recorded for us is what we could call a way of return.

You know, the people are drifted from God by their disobedience, by their sin, but what is presented for us is a way in which they can return and come once again to enjoy fellowship, uninterrupted fellowship, if you wish, with God.

So, that's the way in which we can deal with the chapter or order what we want to say. First of all, then, you have this big problem. The issue of some, it would seem, about a hundred of the returning exiles, members of God's covenant people marrying foreign wives.

Now, we dealt with the matter last week, so we really don't want to do it again this week. But just for the benefit of any who weren't here last week, the problem here is no. It's not interracial marriage.

[8 : 05] That's not the issue. The problem is a religious one, that those who are followers of the living and true God should marry those who were participating in pagan religion.

That's the issue. Now, as it happened, they were of different nationalities, but that's not the issue.

Let that be very clear. We dealt with that last week, but it's worth just making it very clear that what we have here is a problem of interreligious marriage.

That's the core, the nub of the problem. Now, when we say that this is the problem, even if we leave aside the short and indeed longer-term consequences of these mixed marriages in terms of the identity of God's people and how that identity would be diluted and indeed in time perhaps lost altogether, leaving aside that matter, which is a huge problem.

There is also the reality that this was a big problem for the simple reason that it involved disobeying God. Why is it a problem? Well, because it's disobedience.

God had said that they ought not to do this, and yet they were doing it. It was sinful conduct, where the word that's repeatably used in the chapter or in the two chapters to describe the conduct of those guilty of this is unfaithfulness.

[9 : 24] They were guilty of unfaithfulness. Time and time again, that is how their conduct is described. And, you know, we won't mention the occasions, but on repeated occasions, that's how this conduct is described, unfaithfulness.

And this unfaithfulness, this sinful conduct, this disobedience leads to two solemn consequences or outcomes. First of all, it leads to the situation where the people are guilty, the guilt of the people. Back in chapter 9 in Ezra's prayer, what do we read at the very beginning of his prayer? Oh, my God, this is in verse 6, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

And so there is this problem. This disobedience, this unfaithfulness has led to the people being guilty. They are a guilty people. So that's a big problem. And guilt is a big problem.

It's interesting how, you know, in modern discussion, you know, people speak about guilt. And it's almost suggested that, you know, you shouldn't feel guilty. You know, don't feel guilty.

[10:34] Don't beat yourself up. But if we are guilty, then it's only right and proper that we should feel guilty. It's right that our feelings should reflect our reality, if indeed that is our reality.

And guilt is a big problem. So this is part of the problem, a consequence of their disobedience. The people are guilty. But there's another consequence, and the two go hand in hand.

But another consequence is that God is angry. In chapter 10, when the people are discussing the outcome of their repentance, notice what they identify as a desired outcome.

In chapter 10 and in verse 14, what is said there by the people? Let everyone in our towns who has married a foreign woman come at a set time, along with the elders and judges of each town, until the fierce anger of our God in this matter is turned away from us.

And so the people realize that one of the consequences of their unfaithfulness isn't only that they are guilty before God, they are, but God is angry with them. And the great need, the great urgency is that that anger be turned away from them.

[11:45] It's not a good place to be, standing under the anger of God. So this is a big problem.

Now, when we identify this reality of God's anger, you know, perhaps some can be uncomfortable, you know, even with the suggestion that our God can be an angry God.

Indeed, many, perhaps not among those gathered here this evening, I don't know, but certainly there would be many who would protest at such a suggestion, such a primitive idea of an angry God.

But there's no way of escaping that God's anger is aroused by disobedience. But while we recognize that, we also need to understand that that reality needs to be processed, needs to be considered in the light of other truths that the Bible provides for us concerning God's anger.

You know, one important thing to ever be mindful of, as the psalmist reminds us, is that God is slow to anger. Now, that doesn't mean he never gets angry, but it does demonstrate that it's not his desire to be angry.

He's not capricious. He doesn't have a fit of rage. He's slow to anger. His anger is considered, if you wish. And of course, another thing that we need to be aware of while acknowledging that sin produces anger in God, his anger is a righteous anger.

[13:11] And another thing for us to be very much aware of when we grapple with this reality is that God's anger is evidence of his passionate and personal commitment to his people.

Now, we know that's true even in our own human relationships. If there's somebody that we have little concern for, little affection for, little love for, and they're doing really bad stuff, it doesn't really affect us that much.

We don't get that angry with them because we don't have any real commitment to them. We're largely unconcerned with the consequences of their conduct. That may not be a good thing, but that often is true.

But when we are very close to somebody, if we love somebody deeply, and they're behaving in a way that we know will lead to bad consequences for them, that does produce a reaction, sometimes a reaction of anger.

That could be true of a parent with their child. Indeed, the anger is evidence of the commitment to the one who is provoking that anger. So, you have this big problem, the people's guilt as a result of their unfaithfulness and the anger of God.

[14:16] This is the perennial problem of men and women ever since the fall. We are disobedient. We are guilty. And God is angry. It was true in Ezra's day so long ago, but it's the same problem that we confront today.

In that regard, there's really no difference. That's the first thing, a big problem. But there's also in the passage a glimmer of hope. In the midst of a very somber and dark panorama, we have the

wonderful words of a man called Shekariah.

Now, we know very little about Shekariah. As far as I know, this is the only time we have words recorded as spoken by this man, Shekariah. But what a wonderful thing that the only thing that he ever said or the only thing that was ever recorded are the words that we find here in chapter 10. What is he saying? Here is Shekariah. Ezra is distraught by the reality that he's been confronted with. He's grieving. He's mourning. And then this man, Shekariah, the son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, he said to Ezra, we have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us.

Now, there's just one little detail here, a very striking detail. When you actually go to the end of the chapter and you see the whole list of the men who had been guilty of this, Shekariah doesn't appear. Now, isn't that interesting?

[15:41] He hadn't actually done it. And yet he identifies with the people and he says, yes, we are guilty. We have been unfaithful. As a people, we have either done it ourselves or we've tolerated it in others.

We haven't put a stop to it. We are guilty. But then what does he say? And this is really the focus. But in spite of this, in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.

There's this ray of light. There is still hope for Israel. You know, I'm not sure if Ezra really was that convinced. You know, you see Ezra, he's just, he's, you know, he's pulling his head out.

He's distraught. Now, he had good theology. He knew that God forgives. But just the scale of the matter, I wonder if it somehow had really, even for Ezra, led him to wonder, is there hope?

And Shekariah comes and he says, yes, there is hope. There is hope. Yes, we're guilty. Yes, we've been unfaithful. Yes, all of these things are true. But there is hope. In spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.

[16:42] And of course, that truth is one that can be transported through time. There was hope for Israel. And there is hope for our broken, sin-sick world. There is hope for Scotland and its folly and rebellion and sinfulness.

There is hope for sinners. There is hope for the guilty. There is hope for you. Yes, we're sinners. But there is hope. And Shekariah's hope is grounded in the promises of God that members of the godly remnant would have been familiar with and would have clung on to.

And we can think of many occasions when God had made promises to his people in the midst of their rebellion. Let's just note one occasion when he does so. In Deuteronomy chapter 30 and from verse 9 or the second half of verse 9, listen to what God says.

The Lord will again delight in you and make you prosperous just as he delighted in your fathers if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this book of the law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

And of course, these are words, certainly truths, that a man like Shekariah must have been familiar with. Hence, he is able in the midst of the darkness to cry out, there is hope.

[18:03] In spite of our unfaithfulness, there is hope. God has established a way back. God has offered a means of restoration.

The hope of renewed fellowship with God, of the Lord again delighting in you, is within reach for those who turn to the Lord with all their heart and soul. And of course, the good news of the gospel is that there is hope.

Hope for forgiveness, hope for restoration, hope of renewed fellowship with God. It is a wonderful hope for a hopeless world. And so you see very clearly in this chapter these core elements of the gospel, evident, a sinful people, an unfaithful people, a rebellious people, a guilty people, but there is hope.

There is hope of restoration. There is hope of forgiveness. And then that takes us to the way of return for this guilty people.

There is hope, but how can we grasp or experience that hope in our own lives? How could the unfaithful people of God in Ezra's day realize that hope of forgiveness and restoration in their own experience?

[19:16] Well, by the God-established way of repentance and faith. The need for and the nature of repentance figures prominently in this chapter.

But the two elements, repentance and faith, are found almost hidden in the list of those guilty of intermarriage. Notice with me what is said there in brackets in verse 19.

And though it's stuck in the middle of the list, I think it's reasonable to say that what is said there applies to all of the men who are listed as having been guilty. And what does it say about them? It says this, Now, the circumstances are very strange for us, the very problem that had arisen. But the two elements of repentance and faith are there. There is this resolve to change their behavior, to turn away from their sin. That's what repentance is. But there's also the offering of this ram as a guilt offering.

And that's faith. They were trusting in God's provision for forgiveness. And so you have the two elements here, repentance and faith. And we're going to think about each in turn.

[20 : 33] And remember that as we think about these two elements, repentance and faith, as a way of return, we're identifying these things, repentance and faith, as the means by which the held-out hope, this hope that Shekariah speaks of, is grasped or realized or experienced in the circumstances of these guilty men.

Let me just illustrate this idea of faith and repentance being the means by which we grasp this held-out hope.

Where we lived in Peru, there are some serious mango trees. Now, I don't know if you're partial to a mango or not. They're very expensive in this country.

But the mango trees there in Moyabamba and Roundabout, they're huge trees. And when the mango is in season, you can look up into the branches and you see these trees that are just laden down with mangoes.

And they're very, you know, you really want to have some of these mangoes to eat. But the problem is they're just so high up in the tree. And for the likes of you and me, the prospect of trying to climb up that tree is not a happy one.

[21 : 46] I'm sure in our over-regulated world, health and safety would probably forbid you from climbing that tree. But anyway, the point is, the mangoes are there. They're real. But how do you get them?

Well, on the riverbanks, in the rivers in that part of Peru, there are canes that grow. They grow to a huge height. They can grow up to 10, 15 feet. And there's these long, thin canes.

And they're kind of hollow in the middle. And they're used for building. They're used for construction and other means. Now, if you get one of these canes, and at the end, at one end of the cane, if you just, with a machete, you just chop it kind of to split the top of it.

So it's a bit like this. And then what you do is you just go up to the branch where the mangoes are hanging from. And you just connect this open, you know, opening in the cane and grasp the little branch.

And then you start twisting the cane around. And as you twist the cane around, little by little, the branch begins to break. And then it falls. The fruit falls. And if you're quick off your feet, you grab the mango as it falls.

[22 : 44] And you've got this mango. So the mango's there. It's a real mango. It's there. It's what you need. But you can't reach it. But the cane provides the means whereby you secure that mango. There's a sense in which repentance and faith are the means that God has provided for us to lay hold of this hope.

To lay hold of this offer of forgiveness and restoration. That Shekariah is speaking about. There is hope for Israel. And the people say, but how can we experience this hope?

Well, you need to repent. And you need to believe. That's the way you can make that your own. Repentance and faith. Repentance is what figures most prominently in this chapter.

And the description of the people's repentance in this chapter provides us with real insight into the nature of God-ordained and God-pleasing repentance. Let me just notice or highlight three elements that are prominent on this occasion.

I'm not suggesting this is some kind of exhaustive description of repentance. But there are features of repentance that are present on this occasion. First of all, what is very evident is genuine sorrow for sin.

[23 : 50] And this genuine sorrow for sin is not imposed from above. It's not that Ezra comes along and says, you people really should be sorrowful.

You people really should be weeping for your sin. You people really should feel terribly guilty for what you've done. What Ezra had done was preach the truth.

And the people are cut to their heart. And the people, we're told, wept bitterly. There at the very beginning of chapter 10, 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 round him.

They too wept bitterly. They too. Men, women, and children. They're weeping bitterly. As they are brought to that place of being convicted of their sin.

There is sorrow for sin. Now, I have no doubt that the preaching of Ezra, and indeed the example of Ezra, were in a sense the cause and the catalyst for this shared sorrow.

[24 : 53] As the tears of the people mingle with those of Ezra. But it is the people who urge Ezra to act, represented by Shekinah. So, there is sorrow for sin.

Genuine sorrow for sin. And in all true repentance, there must be some measure of sorrow for sin. Now, the intensity of that will vary widely in different people's circumstances and experiences. And it's quite wrong for us to legislate for that and say, you must feel this intensity of sorrow. Or somehow question the genuineness of somebody's repentance because there doesn't appear to be a depth of sorrow.

That's not for us to judge. But that there should be an element of sorrow for sin is surely essential, a necessary part of genuine repentance.

So, sorrow for sin. But then accompanying, of course, sorrow for sin, there's heartfelt confession. Here, Shekinah represents the people in verse 2. Then Shekinah, son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, We have been unfaithful to our God.

[26 : 04] We have been unfaithful to our God. It couldn't be clearer. All sin, ultimately and essentially, is against God. God is the aggrieved party.

Indeed, we could say that God is both aggrieved and grieved by our sin. We, you and me, we need to take responsibility for our sin.

We need to own our sin and confess our sin to God. And this is an essential element of true repentance. So, there's a recognition of sin. There's a sorrow that accompanies that recognition. And then you have the confession of sin. But, of course, another element that is essential for repentance to be present, genuine repentance, is that there needs to be change, serious change. And that's something also that's striking in the chapter, that the seriousness with which this whole matter is dealt with. At every stage of the process, there's the proclamation that Ezra makes, calling the men to gather in assembly.

[27 : 09] And it's a very serious matter. If you don't come, you lose all your property and you're expelled from the people. This is a serious matter. You can't just say, oh, yes, this assembly, not another assembly.

I'm too busy. I'm going to go to that assembly. Well, okay, don't come. But you're out. This is a serious matter. So, even in terms of the proclamation that is made, it gives clear evidence of how serious the matter is.

But not only the proclamation and the penalties, but the thoroughness of the process. You know, it seems that Ezra wanted to just get the thing done. And wiser counsel prevailed and said, Ezra, you know, we can't just rush this.

We're going to have to organize this. We need to seriously consider each case on its merits. Of course, here there are matters of justice that come into play. We can't just, you know, we can't just say, right, all of these men who we apparently are guilty of this, we will just get rid of a lot of them. No, we need to deal with each case on its merits. We're not going to look at all the details of that. But there is a serious concern that the process followed be appropriate and be correct and be just.

[28 : 13] And seriousness, it really marks the process as well. But then, of course, also the action taken by those who are guilty. The change that is evidenced in their lives.

We read in verse 19 what they committed to. They all gave their hands in pledge. The serious commitment to put away their wives. They said, we have done wrong and we're going to put it right. Now, it was a lot messier than just putting it right. But there is this genuine intention and indeed action on the part of those who are guilty. It's a serious change.

Now, this change, this putting away the wives who they had taken to themselves, that was no easy matter. This was tough for all concerned.

It was painful. It was heartbreaking, I imagine, to do what they had to do. And genuine repentance is not a walk in the park. It can be tough. It can be messy.

[29 : 15] People get hurt. The ultimate cause is our own original sin. But in trying to sort it, you know, people get hurt. And the question for us, the question for me, the question for all of us is, if we acknowledge that we are guilty in some respect before God, are we willing to make those serious changes in our lives that would be evidence of genuine repentance?

Now, before we move on and just consider the faith of the people, let's just pause for a moment and acknowledge, and that's all we're going to be able to do is acknowledge the serious ethical challenge of the action taken by Ezra and the people of God.

And really, the question is, how can we justify the treatment meted out to the foreign women and their children? You know, was it really their fault that they found themselves in this predicament? I'm not sure if we have to justify it, if we want to use that word. Now, as I say, I'm not going to provide an exhaustive apologetic for what happened, but I do think that the following factors need to be borne in mind as we make a judgment or as we seek to come to a judgment.

First of all, the situation was a mess, and there was no neat, clean, and painless solution. There was no solution that would have been painless.

[30 : 30] Doing nothing was not an answer, and yet doing what they had to do was also painful. And the reality is that sin is like that. It does impact on innocent victims.

And the action that was taken, I think, could be described as the lesser of two evils. It was not a good thing to put away these foreign women. It's not a good thing to do that.

But it was the lesser of two evils, and that is what they had to do. The action taken was necessary. If they had not taken it, the whole identity of the people would have been diluted, and the very permanence of God's people would have been a threat.

And so it was necessary. It was painful. It was messy. But it was necessary. But I think another thing that we should bear in mind, and although it's not stated explicitly, I think in the light of the whole of Ezra, it's reasonable to come to this conclusion that in the midst of these individual interviews with each of the men that is set out, that they were, you know, priests were assigned and different folk were given the task of interviewing them and determining what action to be taken, it seems reasonable to presume that on those occasions, there would have been the opportunity for these foreign wives to embrace the God of Israel.

And as a result, there would have been no longer any need for them to have been put away. We noted last week how that opportunity for those from the peoples round about them to become part of the people of God was there.

[31 : 54] The door was open. And it doesn't seem unreasonable to imagine that on this occasion that opportunity would also have been afforded, though it's not stated explicitly. So the means of securing this hope, first of all, repentance, but then moving on, and with this we kind of draw things to a close, faith.

You see, our repentance, however sorrowful, however genuine, however serious, does not in itself secure forgiveness or atonement.

If our repentance is not accompanied by faith, then we remain guilty. Repentance must be accompanied by faith, where faith involves believing or trusting in the provision that God has made for forgiving our sin and removing our guilt.

Now, in the case of the guilty in Ezra's day, this involved the sacrifice of a ram that would serve as a guilt offering. That's what we notice in verse 19. Each of the guilty men had to provide a lamb that would serve as a guilt offering.

The ram was provided by the guilty party, sacrificed by the priest, and the ram was sacrificed in the place of the guilty sinner. And the ram's shed blood represented the means whereby the sinner was cleansed.

[33 : 13] And so the guilty Jews in Jerusalem believed or trusted that this offering would secure their forgiveness for the simple reason that God had said it would. I imagine many of them didn't really understand how it secured forgiveness.

But God had said that this was the way, and they believed God. They trusted God. God said, what you need to do is provide a ram. So they provided a ram. If that's what God says we need to do, then that's what we'll do. That's faith.

It's believing what God has said we need to do and doing it. They believed and trusted in his provision of a way of return to friendship and fellowship with him. But of course, in the light of the New Testament, we know, as the writer to the Hebrews makes very clear, that the blood of goats

and of rams in itself cannot cleanse from sin.

These sacrifices were symbolic of, pointed forward to, and gained their efficacy from the future sacrifice of the perfect and immaculate one, Jesus, God's Son and our Savior.

The sacrifices, when accompanied by faith, were made effective by the future, once and for all, sacrifice of Jesus.

[34 : 29] You see, Jesus was and is the ultimate guilt offering, to use the very word that we find there in verse 19. The ultimate guilt offering, sacrifice in the place of sinners.

And this is a truth that we don't simply infer from the biblical evidence, but a truth that is stated clearly and explicitly by Isaiah in that classic chapter, Isaiah 53.

And let's just remind ourselves what is said there in Isaiah 53 and verse 10. And the striking way in which the very thing that these men had to do, provide a guilt offering, is then spoken of and identified with the person of Messiah, Jesus.

So, Isaiah 53 and verse 10. And what do we read there? Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him. Of course, this chapter is about the suffering servant, the Messiah to come.

It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. And then what does Isaiah say? And though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

[35 : 36] You see, the guilt offering that these men offered, pointed forward to, was symbolic of the guilt offering that God the Father provided in the person of his Son.

This is the way of return, the way of repentance and faith, faith in Jesus as God's perfect sacrifice and Savior for sinners. You remember the big problem generated by our unfaithfulness, our guilt, and God's righteous anger.

We were talking about that right at the beginning. Both are dealt with by the death of Jesus. He pays the penalty for sin and so removes the cause of God's anger.

The gospel in Ezra chapter 10, it's pretty much all there. The problem of sin, the perennial problem, my problem and your problem, the problem of each and every one of us here this evening.

For all of us, this is the big problem. We are sinners. We're unfaithful. But there's the hope of restoration, the hope of forgiveness. In the glorious words of Shekariah, in spite of this, there is hope for Israel and there is hope for you.

[36 : 44] You're a sinner, but there's hope for you. How do you grasp that hope? How does that hope become real? Not just a prospect, but a reality. Well, by the way that God has provided for you to lay hold of that hope, the way of return by means of repentance and faith.

Acknowledging your sin, confessing your sin, and trusting in Jesus as the guilt offering that God has provided for your sin. When we participate in the supper, that's what we're going to be remembering and celebrating.

Jesus, our guilt offering, who died in our place, that our sins might be forgiven. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for the gospel. We thank you that there is hope. We live in a dark world. We lived in a messed up world. And we are messed up people. We're broken in so many ways.

We're unfaithful in so many ways. And perhaps in the midst of it all, we struggle to echo the words of Shekariah, but there is still hope.

[37 : 50] And yet there is. There is hope. There is hope for sinners. There is hope in the prospect of forgiveness and a return to God.

And not only some prospect that we can aspire to, but in the gospel, we are given the means whereby that hope can be our hope and our reality as we repent and believe.

So help us so to do. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.