

Ezra 9

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you've heard of Tamara Pletnyova. I'd be very impressed if you have. I suspect most of you haven't. Well, let me enlighten you. Tamara Pletnyova is the chairwoman of the Family, Women and Children's Affairs Committee of the Russian Parliament. So there you go.

Take that note of that. It could be useful for you at some point. Well, anyway, Tamara has achieved her 50 minutes of fame in the context of the World Cup and advice that she has given to Russian women.

Now, we didn't recognize the name, but you may have heard this kind of news item, I suppose. So Tamara has advised Russian women to abstain from sex with foreigners visiting the country for the World Cup.

Now, we might say, so far, so good. We might have great sympathy with her discouragement of promiscuous sexual conduct. That's surely got to be a good thing that she's discouraging such behavior.

In the words of Miss Pletnyova, and I quote, nothing good will come of the inappropriate behavior of Russian women. But where things get less wholesome is when she goes on to give the following reason for her solemn warnings and her fear for the children that could be the product of such liaisons. And this is what she says in that regard. She says this, it is one thing if the parents are of the same race, quite another if they are of different races. And so there we see that Tamara isn't really that concerned about morality or sexual purity. She's just a racist, basically. A racist in the purest sense of the word, this concern that the races not be mixed, because somehow that will pollute a higher race. You know, you couldn't get a more pure expression of racism than that. And I wonder, and it may seem a strange comparison, I wonder if the book of Ezra is a bit like the interview with

[2 : 28] Miss Pletnyova in which she expressed her opinions on this matter. It starts well. You know, it starts very well. We read the first chapters and it's full of studying truths concerning God's people and God's goodness to them and this heroic journey back to Jerusalem to build the temple. And so it starts well.

Yes, there's bumps along the way, but it's all going well. Ezra arrives and that's good as well. But then when Ezra arrived and we come to chapters 9 and 10, which are the final two chapters of the book, things begin to unravel and turn a little nasty. What are we to make of verse 2 in chapter 9? We've read the chapter. I don't know if when we read it you thought, whoa, what's this about? But let me just read it again and just pause for a moment and consider what Ezra says here or what he is informed of and what causes him such distress. We read in verse 2 and it's speaking about the Israelites who had returned from Babylon. They have taken some of their daughters as wives, that is, of the foreign peoples round about them, for themselves and their sons and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. It's rather difficult language, this idea that they've mingled the holy race. You know, is this so different to Tamara's concern about the Russian women not being polluted by foreigners of other races coming and fathering children with them? The language here, they have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. Sounds like something out of a Britain First video. Well, let's take a deep breath and look at this matter carefully, what we find here in chapter 9. I'm not going to address the matter of intermarriage immediately, but look at the chapter under three headings, the second of which will deal with that matter. But the first thing I want to notice is what I'm calling the power of the word preached. Then we'll move on to the thorny problem to be confronted that the leaders bring to

Ezra. Look, this is happening. What are we to do? So, we have the power of the word preached, the thorny problem to be confronted, but then also, finally, we're going to notice and admire and learn from the passionate prayer of a man of God. And this is Ezra's prayer that occupies most of the

chapter.

So, let's begin by considering this chapter, first of all, under this heading, the power of the word preached. Now, before I explain why I'm giving one of the headings to the sermon, this title, let me ask you a question. Why do you think the leaders came to Ezra to share their concerns about intermarriage?

[5 : 20] Then in verse 2, that's what happens. Ezra's there. He's been there a few months, and these leaders, Israelite readers, they come to him and say, look, we've got a problem. We've got a big problem. And they share this problem. Now, my question, again, is why do they do this? Why do they do it at this point?

It's clear from the details that we have that the problem was not a recent one. Given the numbers involved, we haven't read chapter 10, but in chapter 10, part of it is dedicated to identifying the guilty parties. And it's something like a hundred or so men who had been guilty of taking foreign wines.

It also speaks of children that had been born as a result of these marriages. And that, again, suggests that this was not a problem of very recent origin. It was a problem certainly not of months, but of years, some years, maybe two or three years, who knows? Maybe more. We don't know. The question is, given that it's not something that has immediately arisen, why now? Why is it at this point that the leaders come to Ezra and say, look, we have a problem? I wonder, have you got any thoughts as to why that might be? Well, let me give you a clue by asking another question. What do you think Ezra's been doing since he arrived in Jerusalem? Note that he arrived during the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. And we have that in chapter 7. You don't need to look up the reference. Just trust me on that. And then the assembly that is spoken of in the following chapter, when this matter is dealt with in a more corporate way, is identified as having been on the 20th day of the ninth month of the same year. So he arrives in the fifth month, and in the ninth month, this matter has been tackled.

Now, there may have been a few days between him hearing about the problem and then gathering this assembly to deal with it. But what it tells us is that Ezra had been around for about four months. And so the question is, what has he been doing for these four months? Well, I think what is said about Ezra in chapter 7 and in verse 10 serves as the backdrop to what unfolds in chapters 9 and 10. And let's just remind ourselves of what is said in chapter 7 and verse 10 about Ezra. And I'll just read the verse. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel. To this, Ezra had dedicated himself. And so again, I ask the question, and it's obvious what the answer is, what has Ezra been doing for these four months? Well, he's been teaching the law of God. He has been preaching to the people concerning God's law. That's what he's been doing. And the people have been listening. Certainly some of them have been listening. They've been paying attention to the teaching that he brings them. Now, did Ezra even know about the mixed marriages? Well, we don't know if he did. He's only been there for about four months. And I suppose in the grand scheme of things, there weren't that many families affected. Again, you'll remember maybe a few weeks ago when we looked at the numbers of Israelites that had returned from Babylon to

[8 : 43] Jerusalem in the first wave of exiles at something like 50,000. Now, this is a second wave, smaller in number, but this is decades later. Presumably the population had grown, you would imagine. But we're talking tens of thousands of people, and it would seem about a hundred families were affected by this problem of having taken foreign wives. And so, you could conceivably imagine that Ezra didn't actually know about it. Did he preach specifically about this matter? You know, there are passages in the Law of Moses that he could have preached on about this matter. Had he done so in the time that he was there? We don't know. If he didn't know about it, it's possible that he hadn't touched on this specific matter in his teaching. But what we do know is that Ezra would have preached a message that centered around the theme of holiness. He preached the holy law of God, and he preached to a holy people, that is, a people that had been set apart, and a people who had been called by God to live holy lives.

Indeed, the very language that we found somewhat discomfoting there in verse 2 describes them as a holy race. And so, his message was a message that revolved around the theme of holiness, the holiness of God, the holiness of God's law, and the holiness to which God's people were called. And we know something of the impact of his preaching. And of course, one of the things we know is precisely what's going on here in this chapter. The leaders, some of the leaders, approach Ezra

convicted about the behavior of the people, and especially, we're told, the leaders, who instead of giving a good example, were giving a very bad example to the others. And we don't know, we're not told, but we are told that it was the leaders who approached Ezra about this problem, and then we're told that those who were guilty of this were among the leaders, were perhaps even some of the guilty parties convicted of their sin coming to Ezra and saying, look, this is what we've done. We've messed up. Not just other people, but we've messed up. And what are we to do? The preaching of God's word was having an impact on those who heard it. They see that their conduct that they thought was fine, that they didn't really have a big problem with, certainly not a big enough problem with to not do it, was evidence of unfaithfulness to God. We're told also that the people tremble at the words of the God of

Israel. There in verse 3, when Ezra has been told this report of how these men had married foreign wives, what is the response? When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me.

It doesn't say that everyone trembled, but it says that those who did tremble gathered around Ezra. So among the leaders and among the people, there are those who are being impacted by the word of God.

[12:03] They're trembling at the holiness of God's word, at the righteousness of his word, at the truth of his word, at how it pierces their soul, and they tremble. This is the power of the word preached.

Now, when I first was kind of constructing this sermon, the heading I had for this first part was a faithful preacher. But as I reflected on it, I thought, well, really, we shouldn't be focusing on the faithfulness of the preacher. Not that that's unimportant, but rather the focus should be on the power of the word preached. You see, the power resides not in the messenger, but in the message. It's the message that is powerful. It's the truth that convicts, not the one who delivers it. Now, clearly, there should be an integrity and a coherence in the message and the messenger, but principally, the power resides not in the messenger, but in the message as it is taken by God and impacts on those who hear. And so we're struck by, as we come to the very beginning of this chapter, by the power of the word preached. And we need to pray that the word of God preached in this congregation, in this city, and in our land would have this impact as God's people tremble at the words of the God of Israel. We should not leave a service where the word of God is preached unmoved, indifferent, and just carry on as we had before. No, the word of God is to affect us. It is to cut to the core of our being. And that is what's happening here in Jerusalem.

So that's the power of the word preached. But the second thing I want to notice is the thorny problem to be confronted. And we began the sermon by touching on that and, you know, just noting how it seems to be a real moral dilemma, this prohibition of marrying foreign wives.

So let's think a little bit about this and the whys and the wherefores of it. And we're calling this the thorny problem to be confronted. What was the problem? Well, the problem is clear. The problem was what we might call mixed marriages. The title of the chapter there in Ezra 9 is intermarriage.

[14:36] Mixed marriages with the people around them is the actual language used there in the first couple of verses. So these were marriages between returning Jewish exiles and the pagan peoples who lived in and around Judah. And we have the list of the peoples there in verse 1. Canaanites, Hittites, Parasites, Jebusites, Ammonites, and so on. Now, there's a history to this, which in itself is quite revealing, but we don't have time to dwell on. And that is that all of these peoples shouldn't have been there in the first place. But because when the people of God took possession of the land, they didn't follow God's instructions, well, generations later, centuries later, it haunts them as these people in close proximity lure them into behavior that is displeasing to God.

Anyway, that's by the by. The point is the problem is that the Jewish people returning from exile are marrying, or some of them are marrying, peoples from these pagan peoples. Now, why was this a problem?

Clearly, that is the problem, but why is it a problem? Is this not a beautiful step towards the building of a rainbow nation and a multicultural paradise? Why would we be concerned about the Jewish people marrying the Hittites or the Jebusites? What's the big deal? What's the problem with that? To cut to the chase, was Ezra a racist? Is the Bible racist? Many would accuse some of what we find in the Bible, like this passage, as being an example of racism. Does the Bible forbid interracial marriage?

I certainly hope not, because I'm in a marriage that could be described in that way. As I was considering this matter, I found a fascinating website with archived photographic material of notes taken by Martin Luther King on little cards. Martin Luther King was a great man of God, a flawed man of God, as we all are, but a great man of God, greatly used in the field where God called him. But he wasn't a prolific writer. But what he would do is take notes. He had little cards that he would carry around about him, and when he had some thought, he would just take notes on these little cards. And these cards have been preserved. And on this website, you have a photographic archive of all of these cards that Martin Luther King had scribbled on over the course of his life. And among them, he comments on these two chapters in Ezra. Now, it's understandable that he's coming at it from a place where, you know, he's confronting racism in a very ugly form and fighting against it. And so, you know, that's his context, and we have to recognize that. But listen to what Martin Luther King has to say about Ezra chapters 9 and 10. And I read textually what he says.

[17:40] Chapters 9 and 10 reveal the narrow nationalism of Ezra. So narrow is his nationalism that it rises to unethical. Ezra did not have the insight to see that properly races do not marry, but individuals marry. And I close the quote. In summary, Martin Luther King takes the view that Ezra was a narrow nationalist and he was guilty of imposing his narrow racist views on God's people in Judah.

But Martin Luther King, for much as I admire him and all that he did, is wrong. He's wrong on this matter. And let me be very clear. The issue Ezra is addressing is categorically not about race or ethnicity. The issue is about religious identity and practice. That's the core of the problem. And the very first verse in chapter 9 is crystal clear, because there, the neighboring peoples are described in this way, the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices. The problem isn't their ethnicity. The problem isn't their race. The problem is their detestable practices. Of the Canaanites and Hittites and Parasites and so on. What were these detestable religious practices? Because they were religious practices. Well, among other beauties, they included child sacrifices connected with the rituals of witchcraft. If you want to read some of that, you can read in Deuteronomy chapter 18, where some of these detestable practices are identified. We see also Ezra's prayer in this very chapter in verses 11 and 12. Notice what Ezra says there from the second half of the verse.

The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples, by their detestable practices. They have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons and so on. So why were they not to marry? Not because of race, not because of ethnicity, but because of their detestable religious practices.

[19:53] There was a fundamental religious incompatibility between God's people and these pagan peoples. That's why God was forbidding these unions. These marriages would, as God indicated, sooner or later lure the Israelites into such practices and lead to their destruction as a holy people. And so the position adopted by Ezra is simply one of respecting and applying God's instructions on this matter as outlined in the law of Moses, as outlined in the instructions that he had given when they were to take possession of the land so many years before. And again, we have a record of those instructions in Deuteronomy, but for reasons of time, we won't read them now. Now, if there were, and I hope there isn't, but if there were any residual doubt that this prohibition of intermarriage does not have a tinge of nationalism or racism, we simply need to note what is said in chapter 6 and verses 19 to 21 of the same book of Ezra, chapter 6 and verse 19. The instructions are to do with the celebration of the

Passover, you know, a festival for God's people. And what do we read there about this festival and the celebration of it? On the 14th day of the first month, the exiles, the Jews who were returning from Babylon, the exiles celebrated the Passover. The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were all ceremonially clean. The Levites slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, for their brothers, the priests, and for themselves. So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, and notice then what it says, together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the Lord, the God of Israel. You see, it's very clear those who belonged to the Canaanites and Perizzites and Jebusites with their detestable practices were welcome to become part of God's people on one condition. They didn't have to renounce their ethnicity. You can't do that. They couldn't renounce their race. There'd be no reason for doing that.

But what they did have to do was separate themselves from their detestable practices and seek the God of Israel. This was a religious conversion that was required. And where that existed, they were welcome to participate in the Passover. They were welcome to marry within God's people and form families within God's people. Indeed, in the history of God's people in the Old Testament, long before the exile, long before the events described in Ezra, we have the beautiful love story of Ruth the Moabitess, one of the peoples described here. The Moabites, there in verse 1, they're among the people that the Jews were not to marry. And yet, we have that love story. Ruth the Moabitess marrying Boaz, the Israelites, and Ruth being drawn in to the very family line of Messiah Jesus. The problem then is a religious one. And the problem is serious for two reasons. Though these marriages were forbidden by God, and they would in time bring tragic consequences, as Ezra's prayer identifies. Very quickly, is there any application for us today of this prohibition of the Israelites marrying those from neighboring nations and their detestable practices?

So, let's be very clear. This is a religious matter, not a racial one. Well, the obvious application, and it's really a no-brainer, but obvious though it is, it is worth making the point, the obvious application is to the matter of mixed marriages today, or marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. And here we don't rest only on the teaching of the Old Testament, though that is clear enough on this matter. But we can also draw on the teaching that we have in Paul's epistles on this very matter, particularly in his letter to the Corinthians. And again, it's not my purpose this evening to preach a sermon on this matter, but we're familiar with the language that Paul uses, where he forbids God's people to be unequally yoked. What fellowship does light have with darkness?

[24 : 15] That's his argument. Now, that's a principle that doesn't only apply to marriage, but it certainly applies to marriage. And so, there is this clear, unequivocal prohibition of such unions. And we could draw your attention to other passages in the New Testament that reinforce that reality. That's an obvious application of what we find in Ezra. But beyond marriage, we need to avoid any conduct that blurs the distinctives between God's holy people and those who are not God's people. Indeed, those who often mock God's law and standards. We are to remain distinctive in the world, immersed in the world, influencing the world for good, but not of the world, not polluted by the world. This is the concern that finds expression in this problem that arose in Jerusalem, you know, two and a half thousand years ago. Finally, in this chapter, we have the passionate prayer of a man of God.

What does Ezra do when he hears of these mixed marriages? How does Ezra respond? Does he begin by pointing the finger and condemning the guilty parties? Does he go on a self-righteous rant and launch a series of hellfire and brimstone sermons? No, he doesn't do that. What does he do? He breaks down in anguish and pain. Verse 3, When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled air from my head and beard and sat down, appalled. This is not so much anger, though there may be some anger. It's despair. It's heartbreak.

He loves God and he loves God's people and it grieves him to hear of conduct that is dishonoring to God and harmful for God's people. So he breaks down in anguish and pain. He doesn't take the high moral ground and say, you terrible sinners, how could you possibly do this? He breaks down in pain. And what else does he do? Well, then he prays. He prays. And Ezra's prayer is the outpouring of a broken heart before God and serves as a model for us as we are convicted not only of our own sins, but the sins of the church of which we form a part. And the big lesson, I guess, that we can draw from his prayer is surely this. We are to be slow to condemn and quick to confess. Slow to condemn. Of course, there's a place for highlighting sin and calling it for what it is. But if we are to consider the balance of our response, slow to condemn and quick to confess. I'm not going to delve into the detailed content of the prayer because time doesn't allow us to do so. But simply note three striking features of Ezra's prayer. First of all, identification. Note that throughout the prayer, and you'll forgive me, you're going to have to take me on trust here because we don't have time to back this up by looking in at the verses in the chapter. But throughout the prayer, you know, Ezra is praying in the first person plural. Our sins, our rebellion, we have fallen short. Now, Ezra hadn't married a Jebusite or a Canaanite. Ezra wasn't guilty of practicing these detestable practices. And yet, as a member of God's people, he identifies with the sin of God's people. Indeed, as we've seen in terms of the number of people involved, it was a relatively small proportion of the total population. And yet, here is a man who identifies with the sinner. He identifies with the transgressor. He acknowledges his own guilt in the sense of being part of this people who have been guilty. He identifies with the sinner. Does this identification of a righteous man, not a perfect man, but of a righteous man with an unrighteous people remind you of anybody? Well, what does

the prophet Isaiah say of Messiah Jesus? He was numbered with the transgressors. He was altogether righteous, but he identified with the transgressor. Indeed, he was made sin for us. Such was his identification.

[28 : 41] He doesn't condemn from heaven, but he comes down into our sin-sick world and identifies with us. And in Ezra, we have a pale shadow of that as he identifies with this sinful people.

There's identification. But of course, the prayer is from end to beginning, from beginning to end, a prayer of confession, of confessing the sin of the people.

Verse 10, But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servant, the prophets. We have sinned against you.

In verse 13, what has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt. So this is a prayer of confession. He honestly acknowledges how they have fallen short, how they have broken God's law. He acknowledges the seriousness of the matter. He doesn't downplay it. He doesn't make excuses for it. He confesses. But the prayer is also marked by and interwoven through the prayer.

There is this real sense of gratitude to God for His grace, for His patience. You've not punished us as we've deserved. You've given us this brief moment of a new start, of a fresh start. You know, we've sinned against you so many times, and yet you're always there, ready to forgive us. And so in Ezra, there is this confession of sin, but accompanied by this gratitude to God for His grace and His willingness to forgive. Identification, confession, gratitude. May these features mark us as we come to God, confessing our own sins, but also the sins of the people that we form a part of. But let me close with this. There's one more striking feature of Ezra's prayer that we find in the very last verse of the chapter. And notice what he says there as he ends his prayer. He says this, O Lord, God of Israel, You are righteous. We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before You in our guilt, though because of it none of us can stand in Your presence.

[30 : 57] What is Ezra doing there? Well, Ezra is abandoning himself in the arms of a righteous and gracious God.

He doesn't ask for anything. He doesn't even ask to be forgiven. He doesn't even ask for mercy or grace. What he does is state the situation honestly and candidly. He says, You are righteous.

On that, we are clear, says Ezra. You, God, are altogether righteous. We are guilty. These are the two big truths of humanity. There are no bigger truths, really, that we have to own.

God is righteous. We are guilty. And then what does he do? He basically says, Do with your people as you see fit. You're righteous. You're just. You're wise. You're holy. You will do the right thing. Do with us as you please. Ezra almost doesn't know what God can do in the face of this conundrum.

He's righteous. The people are guilty. What can even God do to bridge that gap? What can God do in the face of such a good reality that remains our reality today? Well, that's the story of the gospel, isn't it? God bridges the gap in the person of his son, Jesus, the one who dies for our sins and gives us the righteousness we lack. Yes, God is righteous and we are guilty. But the glory of the gospel is that the righteous God gives us his righteousness.

[32 : 38] In the person of his son, he dies for our sin, not only to secure our forgiveness, but having lived that perfect life, he takes our sin and gives in return his righteousness.

Jehovah said, Kednu, Jehovah our righteousness. That's how God responds to this prayer of Ezra and to the prayer of men and women down through the ages who acknowledge this reality. You are righteous.

I am guilty. Do with me as you see fit. And as I say in the light of the gospel, we know the wonderful thing that God has done. And the way that he has secured for us a way back, being sinners into the presence and the fellowship and the friendship of a holy God. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that we are indeed a people called to be holy, to be distinct, to be separate, to reflect something of who you are. And we confess that we fall so very far short.

We are lured by the world. We flirt with sin. We downplay your law. We view it as being overly harsh, and we know better. We imagine that nothing will come of our foolishness. Help us to see the folly of our ways. Help us to recognize our guilt. Help us to confess our guilt. And help us to abandon ourselves in your arms, in your grace. We thank you for the gospel. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the way in Jesus. A way has been provided for us to come back into fellowship with you. And we thank you in his name. Amen.