

Ezra 5:1-2

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Date: 23 June 2024

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[0 : 00] A very warm thank you again for having me. It's a real privilege to be here. And if you want to have Ezra 5 open in front of you, that'd be a help. Just before I pray for us, let me...

I preach this as part of a sermon series in Ezra, but I believe you've not been having a sermon series in Ezra. So if you're slightly rusty on your Ezra, let me just give you a little recap. Ezra is one of the post-exilic books, which means it's about sort of 600 years, 500 years before...

No, more like 500 years before Christ. And it's just after the people have suffered this great exile. They've been taken into Babylon for their sins. They were there for 70 years. The Lord has brought them back.

And Ezra's the story of the first returnees and the way that they come back. They're a little sort of suffering people, but they're getting on, building the temple, that sort of thing. And largely after the sort of horrors of the pre-exile people of God and all their unfaithfulness, Ezra's a very positive book.

Right at the end, chapters 9 and 10, you see a sort of fairly big sin. Some people have been sinning, but even there, they do really well in dealing with it. And we're going to see some of that sort of positivity in these two verses.

[1 : 06] Let me pray for us now. Blessed are you, O Lord. Teach us your statutes.

You are good. You are good. And you do good. Teach us your statutes. Open our eyes that we might see wonderful things in your word.

In the name of Christ we pray. Amen. So having given an overall introduction to Ezra, let's just zoom in on these two verses.

What's been going on here is that in chapter 4, opposition has arisen to the rebuilding of the temple. The whole first half of Ezra is about the rebuilding of the temple. Oppositions are arisen. At the end of chapter 4, people have come with messages from the emperor saying you have to stop doing this work.

And so they have to down tool. They're compelled by force to do that. And in that context, you get chapter 5, verses 1 and 2. Now the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who are in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who are over them.

[2 : 09] Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua, the son of Jezodak, the sort of descendant of David and the priest, arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

So here we are again. I've been saying they're doing pretty well. Here they are doing pretty well.

They face serious opposition. People have come to them and stopped them building. But the prophets spur them on and they respond well to that spurring on and they rebuild.

And God is with them. Their hands are strengthened. But there is a very strange silence going on in these verses.

There's something that God is not saying here that he doesn't mention. And I want to take you to the prophet Haggai. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the ones who are prophesying.

And this is one of those places where we know what they said. We know exactly what they said to people because they wrote it down in their books. You don't actually have to turn there in your Bibles because all the passages I'm going to look at are in your service sheets, although you're very welcome to turn there in the Bibles and check that I'm not making things up on your service sheets.

[3 : 19] It's very striking having read Ezra, where they do so well, and it's so positive, to go and read what Haggai actually said to them. Here's how Haggai starts. In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son

of Jehozadak, the high priest.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, these people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet. Is it a time for yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses while this house lies in ruins?

That's a rebuke, isn't it? God says to them through Haggai, you guys are busy with your own houses, your own projects. You've given up building my house.

You've got your excuses. And if you read Ezra, the excuses are pretty strong. They were compelled by force to stop building. But God says to them through the prophet Haggai, you've got your excuses. It's not the right time, but the basic fact is that you've abandoned me.

You're turning away to your own comfort. And it's so serious that God says he's started disciplining the people. They've had bad harvests because of their disobedience. Here's verse 9. You looked for much and behold it came to little and when you brought it home I blew it away.

[4 : 29] Why, declares the Lord of hosts, because of my house that lies in ruins while each of you busies himself with his own house. You've been disobeying me.

You've been neglecting my glory. And I have already been disciplining you. That is the message that Haggai brings to the people. So when the people listen to Haggai and seek the Lord and do the work, it's not simply that they've been doing really well and then here they continue to do well or maybe shift up a gear.

No, this is repentance. This is turning around. They were sinning. And they leave their sin and they seek God and they serve him. Well, we have all the dates for this because Haggai and Zechariah date their prophecies very carefully.

Haggai preaches in the 6th month. They start building in the 7th month. How about Zechariah? We've got two prophets in Ezra, chapter 5. Haggai and Zechariah both come. Zechariah starts preaching a little bit later in the 8th month.

They've already restarted work. They've been going for a month now. So you might expect just pretty solid encouragement from Zechariah. Well done. You've repented. Now keep going in that repentance. But no, this is the way Zechariah starts.

[5 : 35] In the 8th month, in the 2nd year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, saying, The Lord was very angry with your fathers.

Therefore say to them, thus declares the Lord of hosts, return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. In the 8th month, they've been building for a month, Zechariah comes to them with another message of repentance.

You are away from me, as your fathers were. You must still return to me. They've already started again on the temple, but clearly there's some repentance to go. They've sort of done some of that external work to turn around, but their hearts aren't quite right yet.

Zechariah doesn't beat around the bush. Repent. Return. And he says it pretty strongly. Very angry. In the life of that, doesn't Ezra 5 seem rather remarkable?

All Ezra says is that Haggai and Zechariah prophesied, and the people rose up to build, and the prophets are there supporting them. There's no mention of rebuke.

[6 : 48] There's no mention of repentance. It's just really positive. You're reading right through the book of Ezra. You've been feeling really positive so far. Ezra wants you to carry on feeling positive about everything the people are doing.

What do we do with that? Arguments from silence can be dangerous, can't they? I'm about to give you an argument from silence that I sort of want to warn you against most of them. Anytime you say anything, there's a sort of billion and one things you haven't said.

If I tell you that God loves you, and you go, well, he didn't say anything about the price of tea in China, and so that proves that theology doesn't say anything about Chinese home economics. So if you want to be a theologian, you have to leave those things behind.

No tea for you. Well, that's nonsense, isn't it? I just wasn't talking about that thing. But sometimes, silence is significant. And what I want to do, really, in the rest of our time, I sort of want to use this thing in Ezra 5 as a springboard.

Because the silence that happens here is the silence that happens over and over again in Scripture. A kind of quietness from the Lord that I want to draw your attention to.

[7 : 52] I want to give, in detail, a couple more examples. First of all, King David. King David, probably one of the most famous Old Testament figures.

He's famous for all sorts of things. He killed a giant once with a stone. You might have heard about that. He wrote a whole bunch of psalms. Probably sung some of them. He's also famous, isn't he, for the time he committed adultery and lied about it and committed murder to cover it up.

Nine months, that was, of hard-hearted rebellion against God. The worst abuse of kingly power. It was the absolute pits. Perhaps you know the story.

The prophet Nathan comes to him and confronts him and David finally recognises his sin and goes, I've sinned. And wonderfully, immediately, the prophet Nathan says, the Lord's taken away the guilt of your sins.

You're forgiven. Just like that. What happens next in David's life? Well, two very important things.

On the one hand, Nathan says, you're forgiven, but there's still going to be consequences.

[8 : 54] You've brought sexual sin and murder into your house. Those things are not going to leave your house. Those things don't go away quickly. And the rest of the book of Samuel covers the horrible fruit of that.

David's baby son dies. His other son does something awful that I won't mention in a sort of all-age group like this. And that leads to murder and eventually to civil war.

The consequences of David's sin spiral on and on. I think it's fair to say if you put the books of Samuel and Kings together, that's the sort of 400, 500 years of Israel's history. That end in the division of north and south and then exile of both of them.

And you can say all of that disaster right down to the exile has its roots in David's sin. It's big stuff.

The consequences are really painful. That's one thing.

And the other thing is that even as all those consequences to David's sin are playing out, we stop talking about David's sin.

[9 : 58] It stops being mentioned. You can read about it in the Psalms where he confesses to God, but the narratives don't talk about it anymore. They don't say and this bad thing happened because of David's sin.

That one too, that's also David's fault. See this bad thing? Remember David? Listen, don't commit adultery. If you've read One Kings recently, you might have noticed that over and over again they do pick up Jeroboam's sin.

Jeroboam, the unrepentant king of Israel committed a great sin, led people into idolatry and they bang on and on about that. There's hardly a king goes by who's a bad king where they don't go and he's sinned the sin of Jeroboam and they're constantly bringing you back to it.

They really could go, oh, he followed in the footsteps of David. But instead of that, there's silence and actually there's more than silence. I've put in your sheets another verse from One Kings.

God says to Solomon, David your father walked with integrity of heart and uprightness doing according to all that I've commanded you keeping my statutes and my rules.

[11 : 10] And I think we read that. I think I've been in groups where we've read that passage and people have gone, hang on a second. I can think of two quite big statutes that David didn't keep.

What's this talking about? But there it is. God says, David did all I commanded. Or a couple of chapters later when Solomon, David's son, screws up and turns away instead of saying, oh, just like his dad.

We get 1 Kings 11 verse 4. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God as was the heart of David his father.

And again, we want to go, well, David's heart was wholly true to the Lord his God. Where does nine months of rebellion and adultery murder fit into that? When you read the book of 1 Chronicles, by the way, it's even worse.

1 Chronicles goes back over David's life again, sort of retells the story and just leaves out the sin and its consequences entirely. It just presents David as this righteous glowing figure.

[12 : 11] Go and read 1 Chronicles. You're not going to find anything bad said about him. Well, actually, you'll find a different story about a census. You're like, why does it care about that?

Anyway, that's not the topic of this evening. So you get these two things.

On the one hand, real, ongoing consequences for sin. On the other hand, this strange silence. almost as if God couldn't see David's sin anymore.

As if it had been covered. Another example, before I kind of try and draw these threads together. Lot, Abraham's nephew, Lot. If you read the book of Genesis, you come across Lot several times and I'm not sure if I should really say this about a righteous man in Scripture, but most times you meet him in the book of Genesis, you kind of want to shake him a little bit and go, you are such a chump.

Stop being such a chump. He's the guy who picks where he lives by what looks good, not by God's promise. Genesis 13, he goes and lives near Sodom, famous for his wickedness.

Then he ends up living in Sodom. And in Genesis 14, he's captured by another king. His uncle Abraham saves him. He has this golden opportunity to go out. That was kind of a stupid thing to do. But instead, he goes back and lives in Sodom again.

[13:28] He becomes, in fact, a significant figure there. He's sort of sitting in the town gate as one of their elders, I guess. And when God sends angels to destroy the town of Sodom for its wickedness, Lot hosts those angels in his house.

That's a good thing to do. And when townsfolk come and attack the angels, Lot offers his own daughters to them. It's horrible, horrible stuff. When the angels tell him to flee, he can't even make up his mind to do that.

He hesitates. The angels have to drag him out of the city. His wife dies under God's judgment. His daughters, again, awful wickedness. I'm not going to go into it in an all-age service. And that is the end of Lot's story in the Old Testament. He loses everything he has.

His wife and his whole family end up under God's judgment. All he saves is his own skin. The consequences, again, we have consequences to Lot's foolishness. They are very severe. And yet, when we get to the New Testament, we find a very strange passage.

2 Peter, chapter 2, verses 7 and 8, which says that he, which is God, rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked.

[14:35] For as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over the lawless deeds that he saw and heard. And that is all that the New Testament says about Lot.

Doesn't mention his folly and his sin. It's one point where Jesus mentions his wife, but doesn't ascribe that to him. Peter here zeroes in on pretty much the one good thing you could say about Lot, which is that when he saw the evil around him, he didn't like it.

That's honestly not a very high bar, you'd think. The evil around him distressed him. But Peter takes that one thing and holds it up to us that we might honour it, ignoring all the sin and folly around it, and calls him righteous Lot.

Righteous Lot. Something remarkable there, isn't there? That is not a one-off. You will search very high and wide to find the New Testament criticising any faithful Old Testament figure.

Wicked people, like Cain and Esau, they get criticised, they're held up as negative examples, don't be like them. Unfaithful Israel as a nation is criticised, that's held up as an example, don't be like the unfaithful generation that came out of Egypt, for example.

[15:59] But the faithful individuals, not so much. I think there's maybe one time where it mentions that Aaron did the golden calf thing. That's about it.

It would be so easy, wouldn't it, for the New Testament to hold up David and go, don't commit adultery like David did, the consequences were really bad. That seems like a really obvious example to hold up, but it never happens. Lot is not criticised, Moses is not criticised, but the closest we get is in Jesus' genealogy.

where it just mentions who Solomon's mum was, the wife of Uriah. You can kind of put that one together. You can marvel from that that Jesus came from a family full of sin, but it's not held up, is it?

As a David did this bad thing, look at that bad thing, don't do it. You read the Old Testament, you've got all these messy characters, and you get to the New Testament and it looks back at them over and over and over again as heroes.

What's going on? And the answer, brothers and sisters, is very simple. The answer is atonement.

[17:06] In the Bible, the word for atonement comes from the word for covering. When God forgives a sin, he covers it.

He covers it with the blood of Christ. And the point of covering it is that you can't see it anymore. We say so often, don't we, words along the lines of he remembers our sins no more.

He removes them from us as far as east is from the west. They're covered. We often say those words, we often read them in our Bibles, and yet, I found it so striking to see the application of that covering is that God stops talking about our sins.

He really does remember them no more. It's not just poetry. Sin has consequences, yes, but constant reminders, no, it's gone. David's heart was wholly true to the Lord his God, says God, without winking.

Righteous lot, says Peter, without blushing. In Ezra, Ezra says, the people rose and worked and the prophets supported them, and that is all I need to say about that.

[18:26] Well done them. Have you seen those three examples? There's so many more that we could see. The Lord recorded those sins in Scripture for us to learn from. You can go and read about David's sin, you can go and read about Lot's sin, but he also recorded his silence in Scripture for us to learn from.

You go past Genesis, you never hear another bad word about Lot. The book of Haggai mentions the sin, in order to write down his prophecy, but the book of Ezra covers it over. He remembers those sins no more.

And I want in the time we have left just to reflect on this in two ways. First, for our encouragement, I'd just like to sort of press in for you this evening that that is the way the Lord treats you.

And then second, for our instruction, I'd like to spend just a little bit of time pressing in that this is the way we're called to treat one another. First then, the way the Lord treats you.

We often find it hard to believe that the Lord really forgives us. We sin.

[19:32] Maybe it's a smaller sin, it's a bit of laziness, it's a crossword. Maybe it's a bigger sin. An abortion, maybe many years ago.

Perhaps years where you walked away from the Lord and big or small, we come to the Lord, don't we, and we confess that sin, we repent, we seek his forgiveness. If there's restitution to make, we try and make it.

And yet, I wonder if you know this experience that in that sort of process of repenting, there's a weight in your stomach, there's an ache in your heart, and they're lifted wonderfully.

And then sometimes they reappear. You feel that. Ache once again. You pray, and yet you still feel like you might be unclean.

Perhaps you're still living day by day with the consequences of your sin, daily reminders of it. So many sins leave us with consequences for the rest of our lives, don't they? Perhaps every time you're reminded of that sin, whatever it was, that pit comes back again.

[20:41] And I want to say to you this evening, brothers and sisters, take heart. There may well be consequences, but when the Lord covers a sin, he really covers it.

If I can put it this way, when God speaks of you to his angels, he doesn't refer to you by your sin. He's not thinking about it.

He's not talking about it. He's not planning to bring it up. When Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians 13, he says that love does not count up wrongdoing.

It keeps no record of wrongs. And your God who is love keeps no record of your wrongs. If you are his, seeking his mercy, seeking his grace, he's not written down your sins.

When his books are opened, they won't be found there. More than that, can I say, from Ezra, from Lot, from David, it's not just that various moments, days, years of your life get kind of blotted out.

[21:53] And so we just don't think about 2014 or whatever it was. It's more that they get looked at through the lens of love and the lens of grace.

Put it this way, if you were to remember one episode in Lot's life, probably the one he wouldn't want you to remember of all, rank them all. Probably the one he wouldn't want you to remember is that one awful night when he offers his daughters to the mob and he nearly misses out on God's grace by dithering.

And yet that is where the apostle Peter goes, not to blame him, but in the middle of all that foolishness and sin, to pull out the one little seed of righteousness, that Lot at least hated the evil around him, and he pulls that out and focuses your attention on it.

It doesn't matter that that diamond was found in a dunghill. Look how good that diamond is. Why on earth would we talk about the muck, the sin? That's covered. But that little righteousness, so small, so easily overlooked, God prizes that and he calls us around to look at it and to marvel.

And the Lord treats you that way too. On judgment day, the Lord Jesus tells us it will be exactly the same. As he tells the parable of the sheep and the goats, remarkable in many ways.

[23 : 12] He speaks to the goats, I never knew you, they're amazed. Terrifying words. But he speaks to his sheep and he praises them. He welcomes them into his glory and their response is to go, hang on a second, when did we do all that?

When were we half as righteous as you're making out? And he draws their attention to their little righteousnesses, their little kindnesses to the poor, that they had forgotten all about.

But the Lord Jesus had not forgotten. He had treasured those things up. He wanted to reward them eternally for them. If you are in Christ seeking the Lord in humility, not only does he keep no record of your wrongs, he treasures up your righteous deeds that you rightly look at and go, how insignificant, how mixed up with sin.

he treasures them up and rejoices over them. How rich his grace to us is, don't you think? How remarkable he is.

And then I want to say, if this is the way the Lord treats us, then this is also how we should treat each other. You know this, I hope, from your Bibles. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

[24 : 32] And the very simple point I want to make here is that forgiving someone means covering over their sin. Now just like with God, that does not mean no consequences.

If someone's been stealing money from the church, you forgive them if they're repentant. You don't make them treasure it, right? There are consequences. But there's also covering.

When we forgive one another, except for the very rare occasions when it might be necessary or helpful, that means we just don't even talk about that anymore.

We don't have to bring it up. It's gone. I want to say that should be true of big things, but also of little things.

And let's just discuss the little things for a moment. Might let it slip under our radar with little things. I wonder whether, perhaps this is just a couple of things I've seen and I'm extrapolating out too widely, but I wonder whether in our culture, it's fairly common in families, in friendship groups, to keep talking about someone's sin or folly as a kind of joke, as banter.

[25 : 41] Particularly when we think it's such a small sin that, you know, who cares? Do you remember that stupid thing you did? What a chump you were. Ho, ho. Do you remember how you were like that for five years?

Oh, man, what an idiot. And the poor, unforgiven sinner laughs along unconvincingly. As I was saying, if you were given to that kind of humour, it's just time to cut that out.

It's an old English proverb, many are truths spoken in jest. A good rule of thumb is, was there anything to forgive in the thing I'm making a joke about? Was there sin in it?

If so, that's not really a fit subject for a joke. Far better just to leave it. The Lord has covered over your much bigger sins. Find something better to laugh about.

It's true for big things as well. If you're holding a grudge, if there's someone that you feel bitter towards, perhaps they well deserved it. We sin against each other in such huge ways, don't we, sometimes?

[26 : 49] And yet the Lord calls you to cover it. Highly recommend here a little article called How to be free from bitterness.

American evangelist called Jim Wilson who died a few years ago. It's only eight pages. I would say personally some of the most fruitful eight pages that I've read. Well worth reading the whole thing. Here's a little quote. He says, How can we tell if we're bitter?

One good rule of thumb is this, bitterness remembers details. You've had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you've forgotten, but this one took place five years ago and you remember every single word and his intonation and the inflection of every part of his voice.

You know exactly what happened and that means you're bitter. He's right, isn't he? Unforgiveness, bitterness remembers, forgiveness forgets.

So let me say that there may well be in a room this size, I imagine there is, I don't know this congregation, but I imagine there is bitterness in some hearts here, unforgiveness. The Lord is calling you right now to deal with him, to forgive, to cover that sin over, to leave it.

[28 : 01] Don't let it roll around in your mind. When you're tempted to chew over it, go to God in prayer instead. Don't keep prodding that sore spot. Cover it. The Lord covered your sin.

The Lord will judge that sin in his wisdom. You cover it. And I want to say to you, there is on offer, it tastes bitter to swallow your bitterness.

Obviously it does. It's hard. But there is such sweetness in the aftertaste once it's gone down and it's not there anymore.

You know that because you know that it is a sweet thing, that the Lord has forgiven you and it is a wonderful thing to take his grace and use it to forgive others.

God loves mercy. He loves to show it to you. He shows it to you more richly than you believe he does.

[29 : 07] And he loves when you show mercy to others. It pleases him. So seek him while he may be found and rejoice in his grace and forgive your brother.

Let me pray for us now.