

When You've Veered Off Course

Ezra 10:1-17

Bellevue

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Please open your Bible to Ezra 10.

Kids, I want you to imagine that you could throw a paper airplane across the country.

Just think how cool it would be to toss a plane from the LA airport and it could fly all the way to the statue of Liberty in New York!

In order for that plane to arrive at the place you desire, it would have to fly in a perfectly straight line, with no wind knocking it off course.

On the day that you release that plane from your hand, it is a perfect day with zero wind. You're in luck! However, because you are imperfect, your flight path is off just a tiny bit. Let's say by 1 degree.

You are off by just one degree. Not enough to notice, but over the course of 2,500 miles, that one-degree drift quietly adds up until the plane doesn't land in New York City at all: it lands about 40 miles away in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Close, but not exactly where you wanted to be.

Now, let's say you want to fly a second plane...

This time, you make an even bigger mistake. This time you increase the error to three degrees..

How far off track does the plane get when the error is slightly larger? Well, this time, you end up over 100 miles off course, landing in Washington, D.C.

That plane plops right in front of the Capitol building. Still in the same region of the U.S., but a completely different destination.

Finally, let's push the error in the flight path to five degrees, and now, guess what? Now that paper airplane that left Los Angeles winds up in Raleigh, North Carolina.

You are hundreds of miles from where you intended to be. It wasn't a dramatic mistake. It didn't feel reckless. It was just a subtle misalignment at the start.

And that's how life with God often works. We rarely wake up and decide to go in the wrong direction. We don't aim to end up in the wrong place. It begins with something small, we let our life move just a few degrees off the path. As the prophet Isaiah said:

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." Isaiah 30:21

Sometimes we know the way, but we don't walk in it. We violate a conviction, we make a small compromise, we allow our priorities to shift ever so slightly. That's always how it begins, and then, with time, we find that we've walked so far from the path, we're not sure how to return and find it. .

Ezra 10 is a story about the people of Israel falling for this trap. We meet up with them at a moment when they all collectively say: "We have veered off course." Here we find a powerful picture of what real repentance looks like.

Let's explore the first two verses:

While Ezra prayed and confessed, weeping and falling facedown before the house of God, an extremely large assembly of Israelite men, women, and children gathered around him. The people also wept bitterly. ²Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, an Elamite, responded to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the surrounding peoples, but there is still hope for Israel in spite of this. Ezra 10:1-2

Here in Ezra 10, we are given a window into what real repentance looks like—what it means to turn back to God once we've drifted off course. Notice first....

1. Repentance begins with a broken heart. (vv. 1-2)

Before anything is said, before anything is fixed, something shatters inside the soul of the spiritual leader. Ezra collapses like a house of cards. V.1 says that he falls facedown. He feels overwhelmed by the sin of his people. The sorrow that is his soon spreads to the people. His

repentance becomes contagious, affecting the entire community. The people all see it now—they have been ignoring a clear command of God.

And what was that command? It was this: keep your worship pure, to guard it from mixture.

This is where we encounter an important Old Testament word: syncretism.

Syncretism: the blending of true worship with false beliefs. It's when devotion to God gets diluted by competing loyalties.

The reason that God wanted the people of Israel to marry people in Israel is because all the surrounding nations were highly engaged in idol worship. This was the cause of the constant tug of war in the Old Testament—the people of God saying “Yes, we want the Lord, and the Lord alone!” But with time it becomes, “Yes, we want the Lord, and we want a little bit of Baal, or Asherah,” or whatever religion the neighboring countries brought to the forefront.

Rarely did they leave God out completely. Rarely did they wholesale reject God. It was more subtle than this. They tried to hold on to God in one hand, while holding on to idols in the other. And the Bible says that God is a jealous God—and not jealous in a sinful way, but in a protective, loving way. Think of this in modern day, when a girl starts dating a good-looking but godless boy. What does a Spirit-filled father do in that moment? He tries to run that boy off, not because he harbors hate toward the young man, but because he knows that the boy will not lead his little girl toward a life of pleasing the Lord. The longer she is with him, the more he will strive to reshape her values and priorities.

And this is exactly what God had warned His people about.

From the very beginning, God had chosen Israel—not because they were impressive, not because they were numerous, not because they were morally superior. In fact, Scripture goes out of its way to say the opposite. Listen to Deuteronomy 7:7–8:

The Lord had his heart set on you and chose you, not because you were more numerous than all peoples... but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors. Deut. 7:7-8

In other words, God's love for Israel was purely out of his own will, not their performance. As Paul said, “by the grace of God, I am what I am.”

But with that grace came a calling: God told them to live holy lives, to set themselves apart from the surrounding peoples. They were to be a light to the nations, but not by blending in. By standing out.

And that's why this issue mattered so deeply. When the people of God intermarried with surrounding nations, it wasn't just a social decision, it became a spiritual compromise.

That's why Ezra was facedown, because they had been told the path to take, and they intentionally walked outside that path. Which always brings pain. Repentance begins with a broken heart. Now, notice what we learn next.

2. Repentance requires action. (vv.3-5)

In just a moment, I'll show you what the people choose to do, to show God how serious they were about obedience.

Repentance is more than me saying out loud that I've done wrong—it's a commitment to show God I've learned, by taking a new direction in my life. If I am truly repentant, I am willing to I'm put forth the effort to turn things around. R

We see this in the story of Zacchaeus. On the Jesus meets this wee-little-man up in that tree, Zacchaeus comes under conviction. He knows he's lived far from God and one encounter with Christ causes everything to shift. He repents of his sins, and then says:

Look, I'll give half of my possessions to the poor, Lord, and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I'll pay back four times as much. Luke 19:8

That's not just sorrow, but a strong commitment to life change.

And we see the same thing here in Ezra 10. When conviction comes, the people don't argue, delay, or deflect—they commit: Look at Ezra 10:3:

Therefore, let's make a covenant before our God to send away all the foreign wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the command of our God. Let it be done according to the law. ⁴Get up, for this matter is your responsibility, and we support you. Be strong and take action!"

⁵Then Ezra got up and made the leading priests, Levites, and all Israel take an oath to do what had been said; so they took the oath. Ezer 10:1-5

So we see: repentance isn't real until it leads us to make changes. And I've seen this play out not just in Scripture, but in my own life. Sometimes I am slow to come clean with God, and sometimes I am slow to come clean with people. Especially my wife.

As I've shared before, Gary Thomas said it well: *"Couples don't fall out of love, they fall out of repentance."* Words more true have rarely been spoken.

When a relationship grows cold, or distant, or strained, sometimes it's busy. Sometimes it's neglect. But often, it's something deeper. It's that one of us has sinned against the other, and there's a quiet, stubborn refusal to own it. And in the heat of conflict, nobody wants to be first.

Because apologizing feels like losing. If marital disputes are like arm wrestling matches, no one wants to be the one that gets their arm slammed to the surface. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the peace makers." The word blessed means happy. The happy people on this planet are those who care more about being reconciled than they care about being right. Sin whispers in our ear: You need to win this one, never "You need to restore this one."

But 2 Corinthians 5 says:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 2 Cor. 5: 18-19

What does this mean? It means that the closer we are to Christ, the faster we forgive. Jesus turns our world upside down and says: the winner is not the one who holds out the longest. Oh no! In heaven, the winners are those who soften the fastest.

So I just have to believe in a room this size, that there's at least one couple who has spent the morning, or maybe the weekend, in a stalemate. A cold war—oh, we have been there, and it's not a happy place to be. Icy silence and cold shoulders. When you get to the car, before you pull out of the parking lot: can one of you muster the strength to offer the first apology? Who's going to say, "*I was wrong and I resolve to do better.*"

Repentance begins with a soft heart, and then a strong commitment to change. And this is what Ezra was leading the people to do.

Now, the real work begins. Watch what happens next in the story.

3. Repentance often requires a process. (vv.11-14)

In other words, the initial apology may activate healing, but real repentance takes time to bring lasting change. Watch how deliberate Ezra and the people are in righting the ship. Skipping to v. 11, Ezra tells the people:

¹¹Therefore, make a confession to the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the surrounding peoples and your foreign wives."

¹²Then all the assembly responded loudly, "Yes, we will do as you say! ¹³But there are many people, and it is the rainy season. We don't have the stamina to stay out in the open.

This isn't something that can be done in a day or two, for we have rebelled terribly in this matter. ¹⁴Let our leaders represent the entire assembly. Then let all those in our towns who have married foreign women come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of each town, in order to avert the fierce anger of our God concerning this matter.

As you see, the process would take a few months. This didn't happen overnight and it couldn't be fixed overnight. Besides, the rain was pouring down. They say, "We can't rush this." Instead of reacting impulsively, they slow it down.

The Bible says that in a group of about 30,000 people, there were around 150 couples that had defied God's command in marriage. They felt that repentance was urgent, but they didn't want to be reckless, so all 150 couples were given an appointment, to investigate what had happened.

Now, some of you in this room are asking the question, "How could this be compassionate, to break up these families? How could this be godly? That's a fair question, and it's one we shouldn't rush past. There is no doubt this was painful. There would have been tears, heartbreak, and consequences that lingered long after the moment.

And what we see here is a sobering truth: even when God forgives our sins, the consequences sometimes remain. The wound heals, but the scar stays.

And that's what's unfolding here. These marriages weren't just relational; they were spiritual compromises that required repentance which begins with conviction, moves to confession, requires action, and it's not always fast. Quick apologies can restore a moment, but only patient repentance can restore a life.

That raises a very real and weighty question: *How many times should a person forgive someone who promises to change but continually offers hollow apologies?* There's tension in that question, because on one hand, we hear Peter ask Jesus in Matthew 18, "Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother?" And Jesus responds, "Seventy times seven." In other words, forgiveness is not meant to be counted or rationed. Just as God continues to forgive us, we are called to extend that same kind of grace to others.

But on the other hand, any wise biblical counselor will tell you that forgiveness and boundaries are not the same thing. If you perpetually let someone off the hook without any change, it's possible that you actually become an enabler—someone who is now participating in the problem. Real love doesn't just absorb damage; it also tells the truth.

When we do wrong, we should ask for forgiveness, but we should also understand that trust takes time to rebuild. Trust is hard to gain, and easy to lose. I was reminded of this recently when I came across the story of famous actor, Matthew Perry.

In his very sad story, he tells about the first time he drank alcohol and how instantly he loved it—how it made life feel better, lighter, easier. He wrote:

I remember that day very well. I had never drunk before. And we just sort of drank this entire bottle of wine. And I lay in the grass and I was in heaven. I thought to myself, "This must be the way that normal people feel all the time," and I thought that at age 14. —Matthew Perry

So the seed of addiction was planted at age 14, and because that craving wasn't resisted, it began to grow.

As his life went on, he earned better roles in TV and movies. As he was filming his first big film, the stress of the job intensified when he was injured on the set. He went to a doctor who put him on pain medication. When he popped that first pill, Perry describes the experience this way:

"It was like warm honey entering my veins."

He had a predisposition to addiction—his body loving the taste of alcohol at age 14. But now, his exposure to prescription drugs pushed his life not 1 degree, but 10 degrees off the path. The secret drug addiction started taking over his life. And the rest of his story is his confession of the carnage of relationships behind him as a result of it.

This is not only how addiction works, it's how all sin works. As someone once said, "Sin fascinates, then assassinates." The reason sin starts is because it feels exciting at first, it feels like an escape from the heaviness of being human. Sin says in our ear—"see, you need this to feel whole." Sin doesn't tell us where the path will end up.

Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end, it leads to death."

Perry's life follows that proverb. What began as something small took over his life with time. Now let me get to my point. When you love someone, you will always look for reasons to forgive, and you will always want to restore trust, but love doesn't mean forever forgiveness with no accountability.

To love someone, we must continually forgive them. But love doesn't stand by and watch self-destruction. We are called to speak the truth in love, and that message may one day be: "I love you but you need to get some help."

Sin multiplies when it's left unaddressed, and its effects become exponential over time. That's why Scripture calls us not just to feel sorry, but to deal with sin early—before a small drift becomes a destructive destination.

Now, with my time remaining, I'd like to address questions that may have popped into some heads as we walked through Ezra 10.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

I've followed Christ for years—why do I still struggle with the same sins? Does that mean my repentance isn't real?

This introduces a real tension in Scripture, because the Bible speaks with two voices that seem, at first glance, to pull in opposite directions. On one hand, passages like 1 John speak with striking clarity:

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 1 John 3:9

That's strong language. It reminds us that salvation is not just forgiveness—it's transformation. The prophet Ezekiel anticipated this when he wrote,

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Ezekiel 36:26

In other words, when God saves a person, He doesn't just pardon them, He plants something new within them. The Holy Spirit begins to convict, to guide, to stir a desire for obedience. So that internal struggle you feel with sin is the sign that your new heart is working.

The Bible says that we should ready ourselves for a lifetime of spiritual battles. In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul writes what all feel in certain times of our lives:

For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate... For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh; for the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it. Romans 7:15, 18

That's not the voice of an unbeliever—it's the voice of a redeemed man who is frustrated that he still fails. So how do we hold these truths together? The key distinction is this: the Bible does not teach that Christians become sinless, but that they become fundamentally different in their relationship to sin.

Before Christ, sin feels natural, even comfortable. After Christ, sin feels like a disruption. Before Christ, we can live in it without much thought. After Christ, we wrestle, we grieve, we resist—even if imperfectly.

A dead heart doesn't wrestle. An alive one does. And I resonate with that struggle in my own life.

One of the areas I've had to face is consistency. The Lord has given me a creative mind—ideas come to me like uninvited guests at a crowded dinner table. Ideas can be helpful, or they can be harmful if they distract a person from their priorities.

Without good people around me, my life can quickly look like little piles of unfinished projects. Years ago, I assumed I would outgrow that—that by this stage of life I'd be highly disciplined, locked in, completing projects like a well-oiled machine. But I still struggle—the only progress I've made is in surrounding myself with people who can help filter my ideas and keep me focused. I have to draw from the well of others, which is the way God wants it. Why? Because there is this gap between who I am and who I want to be.

Thank God that his grace is enough for me. As it is for you.

If you still struggle with old struggles, be reminded that sanctification is rarely a lightning strike; it is more like a slow sunrise. You may not notice the change moment by moment, but over time, the light grows stronger, and what once held you tightly begins, little by little, to lose its grip.

A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:

How can you be sure that passages like this one, from ancient Old Testament times, are still applicable today?

That's a thoughtful question, and honestly, it's one that a lot of sincere people carry quietly. One of the challenges for a new believer is stepping into the Old Testament—it can feel like walking into a dense forest without a map. Many people begin with good intentions: "I'm going to read the whole Bible," and before long they run into passages that raise real questions. Ethical tensions. Cultural differences. Moments where we think, *How could God allow that?* How could David be called a man after God's own heart while practicing polygamy? How do we

make sense of the conquest of the Promised Land, where even women and children were slaughtered? These are not small questions—they are weighty, and they deserve more than a quick, dismissive answer.

One way people try to deal with that tension is by drawing a hard line: “That was before Jesus, so it doesn’t apply today.” Just set it aside. Don’t wrestle with it. But if that were the right approach, it would be hard to explain why Jesus Himself constantly reached back into the Old Testament. He didn’t distance Himself from it—He stepped into it. He said in Matthew 5:17:

Don’t think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. Matt. 5:17

In other words, the Old Testament isn’t discarded—it’s completed, clarified, and brought into full view through Christ. The same is true of the apostles.

2 Timothy 3:16 says,

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness. 2 Tim. 3:16

When Paul wrote that, the “Scripture” he had in mind was primarily the Old Testament.

So how can we be sure it still applies? Here’s the key: we read the Old Testament with discernment, not dismissal. There are parts of it that were given to a specific people—the nation of Israel—at a specific time, under a specific covenant. Some laws, like the ceremonial laws in Leviticus, governed how Israel was to remain ritually clean and set apart. We don’t follow those laws today in a literal sense. But the principle behind them still speaks. God was teaching His people something deeper: *You are called to be holy, to live differently, to be set apart from the world around you.* That thread runs straight into the New Testament and into our lives today.

Now, if you are a new believer and you’re trying to lay your theological foundation, I often recommend starting with the New Testament first, and then circling back to the Old. There’s a clarity that comes when you see where the story is going—when you understand the centrality of Jesus Christ in it all. It gives you a lens. I know this runs against how we read almost every other book—no one picks up a novel and starts two-thirds of the way through—but with the Bible, it actually helps. You meet the fulfillment first, and then when you return to the beginning, the shadows start to make sense in light of the substance.

A Student Asks:

If I'm being honest, I don't feel guilty about some things I probably should—does that mean something's wrong with me?

That's an honest question—and the answer is not as simple as yes or no. It's more like: *maybe... and maybe not.*

Here's what I mean.

Sometimes, Christians can unknowingly become Pharisees. What do I mean by that? Jesus had lots of problems with the Pharisees because they added rules that they felt others should follow. This is sometimes referred to as “hedging the law.”

In other words, if God said, “Don't go inside that space,” the Pharisees would move the boundary line farther out, just to make sure no one came even close to breaking God's command.

If God said, “Don't eat the apple,” Pharisees would say, “Don't eat any fruit.”

So they added rules to protect the rules. Take the Sabbath, for example. What began as a clear command from God—to take a break from work every week, a 24 hour rest—the Pharisees got a hold of that started adding extra regulations. They said you could only walk a certain distance. You couldn't help an animal out of a ditch. Things like that. And over time, people began to feel guilty for breaking man-made rules that God never actually gave.

And that still happens today. There are moments when I might feel a sense of guilt about something, but when I hold it up to Scripture, I realize—I haven't actually sinned. My conscience has been shaped more by culture, or expectations, or even well-meaning Christians, than by the Word of God. So could there be a case where some people say you ought to feel guilty, but you haven't broken God's commands—that is very possible, particularly if you grew up in a very legalistic household.

Legalists are tired people—tired of carrying burdens God never asked them to carry.

But the opposite can also be true.

There are times when we sin but our hearts have been desensitized by the sin. Sin has a way of lowering the volume on our conscience.

King David described this kind of experience in Psalms 32:3–4:

When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was drained as in the summer's heat. Psalm 32:3-4

That's what it feels like to live outside the will of God—not always explosive guilt, but a kind of internal exhaustion. A heaviness. Like something in your soul is slowly wilting.

So how do you know if you're feeling the heavy hand of God?

You go back to Scripture. You ask: *Am I actively engaged in anything that is contrary to God's Word?* And then you ask the Lord to search your heart and show you. The Holy Spirit will reveal it if you're looking for it.

Because the goal isn't to feel guilty. The goal is to get *tender* before God, to express your sorrow for your sin, and to get back in line with the path. The Lord loves you too much to let you fly five degrees off.