

## CRYING SHAME

EZRA 9:1-4 | After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. <sup>2</sup> For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.”

<sup>3</sup> When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled. <sup>4</sup> Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice (NRSV).

**G**od keeps his promises. Seventy years after the first deportation to Babylon, the returned

exiles laid the foundation for the rebuilding of the temple. But God never said the new norm would be easy. Jerusalem was a city without walls and surrounded by enemies who bitterly opposed its restoration. Work on the temple was delayed for 15 years. But with God’s help, the temple was finally rebuilt and dedicated, 70 years after its destruction. God keeps his promises. This marks the end of phase one of Israel’s new life after exile.

Enter phase two: the reformation of the community. King Artaxerxes of Persia sent Ezra the priest-scribe to reform the remnant of Israel according to God’s Word. *For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel* (EZRA 7:10).

Not long after his arrival, Ezra got the shock of his life. The men of Israel were taking wives from the native peoples of Canaan and adopting their pagan practices. The spiritual leaders of Israel were

leading the way in this compromise. Those who should set the best example were dragging the nation back into the detestable practices that had resulted in judgment and exile in the first place.

Ezra was so appalled by these sins that he performed funeral rites: He tore his clothes. He plucked out his hair and beard. He sat down in stunned silence. He grieved like a man bereaved of his family.

The point of this silent sermon was loud and clear: God’s family, the holy seed of Abraham, was in danger of dying out, not by annihilation, but by assimilation—through inter-faith marriage and compromise with pagan culture (9:14). The gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church. But alas! The greatest threats always come from within.

## WALL OF DUTY

■ In the secular world of business, *compromise is not a dirty word* (HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW). Brokers compromise to seal the deal. They negotiate in the company’s interest. They bend over backwards and make concessions for a win-win. So goes the business world. Not so among you! In the biblical world of discipleship, compromise is a lose-lose. Ponder and pray: We are God’s covenant people (1 PET 2:9). A community of faith with core distinctives. We uphold God’s Word as *the authoritative standard for our lives: the compass we rely on for direction, the counsel we listen to for making wise decisions, and the benchmark we use for evaluating everything. The Bible must always have the first and last word in our lives* (RICK WARREN). No compromise!

■ Compromise is a virus. A cause of spiritual decline. A loss of our first love (REV 2:4). Compromise ought to shock us as it did Ezra. It should grieve us and drive us to lament and repent. If not, something is wrong. Examine yourself.

■ Compromise is a slippery slope. At the leadership level, compromise is scandalous. It mocks God. It dishonours his name. It discredits the Church. It confuses the believer. It stumbles the seeker. It diminishes our influence

in society. Pause. Ponder. Pray. Acknowledge that God has allowed this pandemic for redemptive purposes: To put his house in order. To cleanse his temple. To deliver his people from the cancer of sin and the virus of moral compromise.

Are we paying attention? In identification with leaders of every rank and file (parents, grandparents, pastors, elders, cell leaders, head honchos in the public and private sectors), ask God to forgive us. Confess. Repent. O Lord, *in wrath, remember mercy* (HAB 3:2).

We are laissez-faire. We lower the standard. We turn a blind eye to moral issues such as pre-marital sex, abortion, adultery, divorce, inter-faith marriage (unequally yoked), pornography, homosexuality, same-sex ‘marriage’, transgenderism, and so on.

■ Memorise the Word: *What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people’* (2 COR 6:16).

■ Ask God to raise up Ezra-reformers among us to confront the compromising Church. With an eye of faith, a mind of hope, and a heart of love, envision a critical mass emerging. Those who tremble at God’s Word. Those who ally themselves with the Ezra-reformers (EZRA 9:4). Pray for a great awakening. Fear of God. Fire of the Holy Spirit. Fearless. Formidable!

■ Pray the Word. Live the Word: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will* (ROM 12:1-2 NIV).