



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Ezra 9:1-15

Topic

The returned exiles who listened to Ezra teach God's Word are described as "trembling"

Title

"The Trouble with Trembles"

Daredevil was one of my favorite comic heroes... Until the Ben Affleck movie. It was seriously lame.

(No, I haven't watched the Netflix series).

If you are not familiar with Daredevil, he's Matt Murdock. As a boy he was blinded when a radioactive substance fell from a truck after he pushed a man out of the path of the oncoming vehicle.

His exposure to the radioactive material heightened his remaining senses beyond normal human abilities.

You've probably heard that, without the help of radioactivity, if a person loses one of their senses, the others become heightened. Scientific American posted an article titled, *Super Powers for the Blind and Deaf*, in which they noted research proving that, "the brain rewires itself to boost the remaining senses."

They even have a name for these folks:
Supersensors.

In the Bible, we read a lot about the sense of hearing; and by that I mean *spiritual* hearing:

- In Romans 10:17 we are told, "... faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The Word has the power to save when it is heard with more than just our ears.
- In John 10:27 we read, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." It's obviously spiritual hearing, since our Great

Shepherd is in Heaven, and we are on the earth.

- Each of Jesus' letters to the seven churches in the Revelation reference spiritual hearing as He says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Spiritual hearing is highlighted in the last two chapters of Ezra:

- The Israelites are described in chapter nine as those "who trembled at the words of the God of Israel" (v4).
- In chapter ten they're described as "those who tremble at the commandment of our God" (v3).

Trembling indicates they were supersensors, having a heightened spiritual sense of hearing.

Wouldn't you want to be a supersensor, too?

I'll organize my comments around these two points: #1 Come To God's Word With The Hearing Of A Trembler, and #2 Go From God's Word With The Heart Of A Trembler.

#1 Come To God's Word With The Hearing Of A Trembler

(v1-4)

What is the trouble with trembling? It's that we can leave it or lose it. Our text bears this out. Some among the leaders of the Israelites had disobeyed God's command to not marry foreigners. They had left or lost any supersense of spiritual hearing. They certainly did not tremble at God's Word.

Ezr 9:1 When these things were done...

At least four months transpired since Ezra's arrival with the second wave of returnees. It is important to know that in those four months, he had been doing what he came to do - teach God's Word to all Israel. It was his teaching that gave rise to the events of chapters nine and ten.

Ezr 9:1 When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the

lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

I'm going to guess that the guys who were teaching God's Word before Ezra's arrival were skipping over the parts that described their own disobedience. I mean, if your wife is an Ammonite, you can't really take as your text, Deuteronomy 7:3, "Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son."

In the Book of Nehemiah, we're told that Ezra's style was to "read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and [give] the sense, and [help] *them* to understand the reading" (8:8).

He taught verse-by-verse. One good thing (there are many) about teaching through the Bible verse-by-verse is that you encounter things you might not otherwise.

Things that are good for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...” (Second Timothy 3:16).

Separation from all the -ites in the Promised Land was pretty easy to spot, since it involved mostly obvious, outward things, e.g., diet, religion, and marriage.

In Christ **we** are called to remain separate from the world - to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. I think we have it tougher in some ways since it isn't always so obvious; and since God gives us so much latitude. A separation safety check should be performed often.

Ezr 9:2 For they have taken some of their daughters *as wives* for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of *those* lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass."

There are a lot of things in the Law of Moses that can be confusing, sparking endless commentary by the scribes and rabbis as they try to clarify. But prohibiting intermarriage with non-Jews is as clear as clear can be. It was sin, and it would bring devastating consequences.

Christian, I implore you: Do not date a nonbeliever. Do not let yourself fall in love with a nonbeliever. Don't marry a nonbeliever.

Beyond that: Be sure the believer you date is solid. Call their pastor. Send him an evaluation form. I'm serious.

Ezr 9:3 So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished.

In the four months since Ezra had arrived, no one had so much as hinted about this situation. It signified a spiritual deafness that had not taken all that long to set in.

I've witnessed a lot of grief as a pastor and as a Chaplain. I've never seen anyone tear out hair. This was a whole new level of expressing grief. Tearing clothing - hey, that was commonplace to show grief. But Ezra was unique in the Bible in pulling out his hair. He meant business.

Ezr 9:4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

Intermarriage with the pagans always led Israelites to idolatry. They were one small step away from worshipping the gods of their foreign wives. This was part of the reason they had "been carried away captive" to Babylon in the first place.

Be aware that at some point in your walk with the Lord you will be tempted to revisit your former sins.

After years of victories over them, we can feel as if we can dabble and not get drawn in. Let's finish well.

Trembling can have various connotations. Nonbelieving sinners should tremble in fear at the wrath of God. They ought to receive Jesus and let Him take God's wrath against them upon Himself.

I'm thinking of trembling in another of its biblical connotations, as excitement and anticipation and expectation. The trembling these guys were doing was excitement and anticipation and expectation at hearing God's Word.

I'm suggesting that these Jews were already tremblers and when they heard Ezra teach, it inspired them to act upon it.

I'm fully speculating, but Ezra must have gotten to portions of the Law of Moses that talked about mixed marriages.

They heard - spiritually heard - the prohibitions, and - being supersensors - they immediately went to Ezra to report the situation, and to seek the Lord with him for the solve.

I'm sure there are three, or five, or ten things we could list as steps to recapture and return to trembling. More-and-more, that kind of suggestion strikes me as mechanical, especially when we are talking about something more emotive; or what I like to refer to as *romantic*.

When Jesus wrote to the church in Ephesus, and told them to return to their first love for Him, He didn't give them a list of steps. He told them one thing was necessary: Repentance. They needed to have a massive change of heart, and nothing formulaic or mechanical was going to accomplish it.

It's a little (or maybe a lot) like marriage. You're not going to return to being in love by scheduling a florist to send your wife flowers every week. It's mechanical.

You need to go out of your way to show that you are listening and really in love. You need *romance*, not *robotics*.

If I no longer tremble in excitement and anticipation and expectation at God's Word - I may need to repent.

We may simply need to be reminded of a time we were a lot more excited to hear from the Lord. It's easy to drift.

This is the living Word of God, through which the Creator of all things, your Savior, is talking to you. Trembling seems the only proper response.

#2 Go From God's Word With The Heart Of A Trembler

(v5-15)

One of the first books I read as a new believer in Christ was *Know What You Believe*, by Paul Little. Think about that title.

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Ezra

"The Trouble with Trembles"

You believe on Jesus, and get saved. But you really don't know what else you believe until you read and study God's Word.

One thing, however, is true, and that is this: Whatever is in God's Word **is** what you believe - you just don't know it yet.

A Christian should always come to the Word pre-submitted to what God is going to say to them through it.

Ezra was pre-submitted to God's Word. Upon hearing it was being disobeyed, he went from it in humility and obedience, and acted upon it.

Ezr 9:5 At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God.

Ezra led those who had gathered in a spontaneous service of public prayer. While it's not one of those sermon-prayers some people like to pray, it is more than a personal prayer.

Ezra was praying for the nation - making this everyone's prayer.

Ezr 9:6 And I said: "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than *our* heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.

Ezra went from God's Word humbled and concerned for the sinners enough to not try to distance himself from them. Instead he had compassion on them. Compassion is characteristic of a trembler.

Ezr 9:7 Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have been* very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, *and* our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as *it is* this day.

The history of Israel is not pretty. Guess what? The history of the church isn't pretty, either.

My Christian history, and yours, hasn't always been pretty. That's not to dis the church - we are, after all, Jesus' bride, and will be presented spotless and without blemish to the Father in Heaven. It is only to remind us to remain humble when we hear about others sinning.

Ezr 9:8 And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage.

Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. God had not forsaken His special people, but a "remnant" had returned, and had restored things to the point it could be seen as "a measure of revival."

Ezr 9:9 For we *were* slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to

rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

Even though the first wave of returnees had sputtered in their task, God interceded, and they had accomplished much.

Ezr 9:10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments,

The leaders - some of them - had outright “forsaken” obedience to God’s Word. Why?

I’m sure we could list many reasons. Here’s one. The Tabernacle and, later the Temple, service involved a great deal of ritual. It seems to be in our nature to think that if we perform the right rituals, we will be right with God - regardless the condition of our hearts.

Buy into that and the next thing you know, you’re actively disobeying God.

You reduced what ought to be a *romance* to a *religion*.

As a Catholic boy who was certainly not saved, I deduced that I could sin as much as I wanted to, so long as I went to ritual confession and prayed ritual prayers. After all, I'd been ritually baptized as an infant; taken ritual First Holy Communion; and gone through ritual Confirmation. On top of all that - I'm full Italian. Hey, the Vatican isn't in the US.

Ezr 9:11 which You commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity.

The inhabitants of Canaan were wicked beyond the norm for pagans. I read you a lengthy quote a few weeks ago by an archaeologist that concluded infant sacrifice to their gods was something almost unique to the Canaanites.

That alone ought to cause an Israelite to avoid relationships, let alone intermarriage.

Ezr 9:12 Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave *it* as an inheritance to your children forever.'

Is that clear enough? It's a quick summary of what the Law of Moses taught.

Don't forget, however, that a Canaanite wasn't predestined for destruction. Anyone could come to the God of Israel, convert, and be saved.

Ezr 9:13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us *such* deliverance as this,

Three sieges by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon...
The pilfering and the destruction of the Temple...
The destruction of the walls of Jerusalem...
Captivity for seven decades as exiles in
Babylon... It was less discipline than they
deserved.

A trembler acknowledges that God doesn't give us what we deserve. He is merciful. Even when things are at their worst, we can say as Job did, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD" (1:21).

Ezr 9:14 should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people *committing* these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed *us*, so that *there would be* no remnant or survivor?

Ezra knew that God could not renege on His forever promises to Israel. But he recognized that they deserved to die out as a nation.

If I read this and think, “I’m not really that bad,” then I guess I disagree with the great apostle Paul:

- In one place he gave himself the title, “Chief of Sinners” (First Timothy 1:15).
- In Romans seven Paul lamented that the things he wanted to do, he did not do; and the things he did not want to do, he did - calling himself wretched.

This isn’t a false humility; it’s magnifying God’s grace. Ezra could identify with the sinners because he believed that but for God’s grace, he could be doing what they were doing.

Ezr 9:15 O LORD God of Israel, You *are* righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as *it is* this day. Here we *are* before You, in our guilt,

though no one can stand before You because of this!"

If “no one” could “stand before” God on account of this sin, how were they standing before God?

Grace and mercy were being made available while God was longsuffering - not willing to punish His beloved people if He didn't have to.

His longsuffering had waited some 490 years before He brought Babylon against them.

We normally think of God's longsuffering in terms of His not wanting nonbelievers to perish eternally. But His longsuffering waits for believers, too - giving us opportunities to repent and return to Him from our missteps and falls.

Ezra went forth from God's Word and he acted upon it. He fasted and prayed. He'll do a whole lot more in chapter ten.

You've undoubtedly heard some Bible teacher refer to the Bible as God's love-letter to you.

The only thing I'd add is that, while most love-letters are about the object of your love, the Bible isn't about us; it's about God. Through it He reveals Himself to us as the One Who so loved the world that He sent Jesus.

Having said that... If you've ever been in love, and received a love-letter, you probably trembled with excitement, anticipation, and expectation at its contents; and you did so even after reading it multiple times.

All I'm saying today is that we still ought to tremble at God's Word.

