Humility is required to finish our ministry and our lives in a way that is pleasing to the Lord.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Have you ever bitten off more than you could chew in a project? Describe the experience.

Have you ever been a part of a group project where others did not participate well? How did that harm your project and/or your attitude?

Sometimes we think we have what it takes to accomplish big tasks, only to realize halfway through that we have no idea what we’re doing. Group projects can be even more frustrating. Sometimes, others will not pull their weight, and so the burden of moving forward falls on the shoulders of only a few. Often, it proves impossible to finish because others will not take the project seriously. The return of the exiles to Israel started with great joy. The Lord moved the heart of the king to resettle the Jews into the promised land. However, the task nearly failed. Even though the people knew that they had been taken captive because they disobeyed God, as soon as they returned from exile, they began to do the same things that got them into trouble in the first place! It took humility from Ezra to avoid God’s judgment on the remnant that returned. If it weren’t for him and a few others, Israel could have wound up worse off than they began.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EZRA 7:8-10.

How do people tend to react to leadership that promotes changes they themselves are not willing to make?

What are some of the steps Ezra took that would help him be a good leader to the people of Israel?

How are you challenged by Ezra’s example in your own walk with the Lord?

The psalmist wrote that “The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one’s life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise” (Ps. 19:17). King Artaxerxes recognized that Ezra was a wise man. Wisdom was the fruit of Ezra’s dedication to the study and obedience of God’s Word.
Before Ezra could become a good leader for the people of Israel, he had to first dedicate himself to be a student of God's Word. For Ezra, this did not mean a simple memorization of God's Word, but also a devotion to obey it for himself. Before Ezra could call for repentance in the lives of others, he had to be repentant himself. Ezra's discipline qualified him to be the kind of humble leader Israel would need to finish what they had begun on their return from exile.

**HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EZRA 9:1-5.**

**How would you describe Ezra’s reaction to the sin of the exiles? What does the tearing of clothing signify?**

**What does Ezra’s example teach us about how God’s people should respond to sin in their lives and the Christian community?**

**Why would the people tremble at the “words of the God of Israel”? How can the fear of the Lord help us to finish well?**

Ezra reacted with humility, shame, and embarrassment to the news of Israel's sin. After the hope of the new beginning, Ezra was devastated at the news of this breach of God's law. Ezra knew from God's Word that marrying pagan spouses would ensnare Israel to idol worship all over again. Further, the language of the text indicates that these women were living with them more as concubines than as true wives. Can you imagine the despair that Ezra must have felt? Ezra did not lash out in anger. Instead, he humbled himself and confessed the sin to the Lord. His actions moved the hearts of others to do the same. Ezra's knowledge of the Word of Lord had taught him that this was a devastating sin. His personal obedience in the matter helped him to lead without hypocrisy. His heartfelt repentance and confession moved others to join him in repentance and to take action. That is the mark of godly leadership.

**HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EZRA 10:1-8.**

**What do you think of the solution to Israel's sin?**

**How do you think repentance of sin is seen by those in our culture today? How seriously should we take the responsibility to repent of our sins?**

**How difficult is it to get rid of sin in our own lives?**

The measure of repentance was drastic. The people had to send away their wives and children or face the punishment of exile themselves. Sometimes, sin is so deadly that it takes drastic measures for us to be free of the sin. Our culture does not recognize many things as sinful that the Bible calls sinful. Issues of sexuality, divorce, and even honest business practice will strike the world as naïve or silly. But like Ezra, we must be humble and seek first to follow the Lord and His commands. As Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commands” (John 14:15). If we want to live our lives in such a way that we finish well, we must learn the Word of God, dedicate ourselves to obey God from a heart full of love, and help others to understand the Word of the Lord as well.

**APPLICATION**

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

From Ezra's example, we are reminded of how important our study of the Word of God is. What is your current approach to Bible study? What is one step you need to take this week to prioritize time in the Word?

Is there an issue of sin in your own life that you know that you need to deal with? Do you have the strength to humble yourself before the Lord and repent of it? How can our group help keep you accountable?
How important is finishing your life well to you? Ask the Lord to give you wisdom to live such a life that you will not have to be ashamed in the day of judgment.

PRAY

Close the group in prayer to the Lord, thanking God for giving us a community of believers to help us walk by faith. Ask the Lord to help us all dedicate ourselves to learning and obeying the Word of the Lord. Pray that if we have any sin in our lives, God will give us the grace, strength, and humility to repent of it. Thank the Father for the gift of Jesus Christ and His death on the cross, so that no matter how bad our sins, there is grace enough to find forgiveness and restoration if we repent and trust the gospel.

COMMENTARY

EZRA 7:8-10

Ezra’s journey toward Jerusalem probably began on April 8, 458 B.C., but 8:15-31 tells of an immediate delay when it was discovered that no Levites were present. Taking the shortest route, this would be a journey of about 500 miles. However, such a route across the desert would be unlikely in summer, particularly during a time of political upheaval that made travel even more dangerous. The more common route covered about 900 miles. After a fourteen-week pilgrimage, they probably arrived in Jerusalem on August 4, 458 B.C. Ezra’s greatness is seen in his resolve to study... obey, and teach God’s law to God’s people.

EZRA 9:1-5

9:1. Ezra had not long returned from delivering the king’s edicts (8:36) when some leaders presented him with a genuine threat to the postexilic Jewish community—intermarriage between Jews and pagans. Probably the early groups returning from Babylon had included more men than women, making it more difficult to find a wife. Moreover, marrying a foreign wife was not always forbidden. Joseph and Moses each had a foreign wife. But intermarriage with local Canaanite groups was forbidden “so that they won’t teach you to do all the detestable things they do for their gods” (Dt 20:18). King Solomon’s example certainly was remembered, as his numerous foreign wives “seduced him to follow other gods” (1Ki 11:4). The extent of the problem is shown in that all three major groups of the community were involved—the laity (the people of Israel) as well as priests and Levities.

9:2. The situation was made even worse because the leaders and officials had taken the lead in this unfaithfulness. The issue was not racial but religious. God had chosen Israel to be His “own possession” and His “holy nation” (Ex 19:5-6). His plan to bring blessing and life to all the peoples of the earth meant that His chosen people should maintain their identity. From them would come God’s servant who would be “a light to the nations” (Isa 42:6) and would bear the “iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:6).

9:3. Ezra identified personally with the sins of his people, responding with actions associated with repentance and mourning.

9:4-5. Those who gathered around Ezra trembled at the words of the God of Israel—a phrase that occurs in three other OT passages (10:3; Isa 66:2,5). It identified them as people fully committed to keeping God’s law. Ezra got up from his humiliation (Hb ta’anet), a term that occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible but does occur in postbiblical Hebrew and in Aramaic. It probably implies a penitential act in this context.

EZRA 10:1-8

10:1. The term “confessed” is from a Hebrew verb that usually means “to praise, to give thanks.” But in this verbal root, it has the connotation of “confessing” (Lv 5:5), as God is praised when His people acknowledge their sin and guilt before Him.

10:2-4. Shecaniah’s radical solution of sending away the foreign wives and their children was not an expression of racial prejudice but an act to insure the survival of God’s covenant people (9:14). The translation here follows most modern translations in reading “my lord” rather than the Masoretic Text “Lord.” The context suggests that Shecaniah was referring to Ezra and not to God.

10:7-8. The three-day notice was sufficient time to notify the entire populace and for them to travel to Jerusalem. The term “forfeit” is the word used in the OT to put something under the “ban,” as were cities during the time of Joshua that were totally destroyed. It can also refer to things that were totally consecrated to divine use, as in the case of Achan (Jos 6-7), who stole items under the ban.
READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

Nehemiah 1:1-11; Nehemiah 2:1-20