

Renewal Begins with Grief & Confession
Ezra 9:1-15 (1984 NIV)

Introduction

I understand the theme of this church for the coming year is “Renew & Rebuild”. To follow through on this theme, I believe you need at least two things.

- One, you need courage to face up to and address what you desire to renew and rebuild.
- Two, you need commitment to act on what is necessary by taking some concrete and challenging actions.

The assigned text today is Ezra 9:1-15. And I like to ask you to allow me to speak from my heart what I believe the Lord has first spoken to me.

Let me begin with a brief review of Ezra 8 before we look closely at Ezra 9.

- The 1st group of exiles returned with Zerubbabel from Babylon to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem in 538 BC.
- Much later in 458 BC, Artaxerxes the king of Persia consented and commissioned Ezra the scribe-priest to lead a 2nd and smaller group of Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem. By the way, I will use the terms “Jewish”, “Hebrew” and “Israelite” interchangeably for our purpose today.
- In Ezra 8, we read about the return of this 2nd group of exiles who brought with them gifts of gold, silver, and bronze from the royal court of the Persian king as well as donations from the exiles themselves.
- After they had arrived in Jerusalem, they presented these gifts to the temple, followed by sacrifices of burnt offerings at the altar.

Ezra 8 ends with a great and wonderful picture of worship and celebration for the newly returned exiles in vv. 33-36. However, as we open up Ezra 9 today, we see that it is not a continuation of this beautiful picture of worship and celebration. Rather, Ezra 9 opens with some shocking, stunning, and sad words in vv. 1-2.

Indeed, as the saying goes, “Good times never last.” And because this seems to be the reality we often face in life, we need renewal and rebuilding. We need seasons of renewal and rebuilding because life is not always a bed of roses.

And where do we begin this process of renewal and rebuilding? I believe the response of Ezra in Ezra 9 will give us some direction to follow.

I. The Response of Grief (vv. 1-4)

Just after the great and wonderful time of worship and celebration for the newly returned exiles in Ezra 8, some people said to Ezra in Ezra 9:1-2—“Ezra, we have some bad news to update you. It has come to our ears that the people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices ... They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.”

The “people of Israel” in these verses refer to those who were already in Jerusalem before the return of Ezra with his own group of exiles. The population in Jerusalem before Ezra’s return would include this group of “people of Israel” who had earlier returned with Zerubbabel.

So how did Ezra respond when he heard of this state of spiritual unfaithfulness soon after his return? Ezra 8:3 tells us that he tore his tunic and cloak, pulled his hair from his head and his beard from his face, and sat down appalled—i.e. shocked, stunned, and terribly saddened.

To try and capture a sense of why Ezra felt and responded like he did, as if he had gone bonkers, like me ask you to imagine with me.

Imagine we are having a great and wonderful time of worship and celebration right now here in church. And the worship leader leads us to sing this closing song, “Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I say rejoice!” At the end of this song, imagine I come up here to lead you in closing prayer. And I say:

“Church, as I lead you in a time of prayer before we end the service today, I like to share with you all a matter of grave concern so that we can pray earnestly together. Last night, three of our church members were arrested by the police when they were caught participating in some illegal activities with 30 other people in a HDB flat. So I like us to pray for these three of our church members. The first person is our church pastor, the second is our church missionary who’s back from the field on home leave, and the third is our church chairman. Let us all seek the Lord earnestly to watch over them in His grace and mercy as we now close in prayer.”

How do you feel and respond when you hear this news from me, especially after our great and wonderful time of worship and celebration? You probably will feel and respond like Ezra—shocked, stunned, and terribly saddened. Maybe you even want to throw stones

at the worship leader who has led us to sing, “Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I say rejoice!”

Now, have you managed to capture a sense of how Ezra felt and why he responded the way he did?

The great and wonderful time of worship and celebration suddenly and cruelly turned into a gloomy and woeful time of worry and consternation. What an anti-climax!

Ezra 9:4 says, “Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles ...”

- The “everyone” here refers to all those who had just returned to Jerusalem with Ezra. They had all assembled to offer burnt offerings to the God of Israel (Yahweh) for providing and protecting them such that they could finally arrived safely in Jerusalem. These were God-fearing people and they also heard the news told to Ezra. So they gathered round Ezra and shared in his grief and consternation.
- The unfaithful exiles in v. 4 belonged to the 1st group who had returned with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem years earlier. Their earlier years back in Jerusalem had given them long enough time to settle down, marry, and start families.

Now the big question—what is so particularly upsetting to Ezra about the news he heard? To answer that, we need to look more closely at vv. 1-2.

- Firstly, note that v. 1 says that “the people of Israel have not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices”. What were these “detestable practices” of these neighbouring peoples that were so upsetting and appalling to Ezra?

Remember that while the people of Israel were supposed to be worshippers of Yahweh, their neighbours had their own gods and worship practices. The OT tells us that these neighbours of the Israelites had been long-time worshippers of gods like Baal, Astoreth, and Molech.

The worship of Baal required the sacrifice of children by fire, often the first-born male child. It has been suggested that the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, when God told him to sacrifice this son and then forbade the sacrifice at the last moment, was meant to be a dramatic and instructive narrative employed to command the Hebrew people not to follow the pagan cults of the land. Put in another way, this was God’s command to Abraham as he was about to perform child sacrifice—i.e. “Stop! Don’t do it!” It was as if to teach that the great patriarch himself was told to sacrifice his son, but God was only testing him to see if he

would obey God's command in faith. And just when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, God stopped him from following the way of the pagans—i.e. child sacrifice. Likewise, all Yahweh-worshipping Hebrews in the OT must not follow this practice of their pagan neighbours however tempted they were.

Ashtoreth was a popular goddess worshipped in the OT by the neighbours of the Israelites. She's a deity associated with sexuality, fertility, and war. The ancient Hebrew prophets denounced her cult many times, most likely because she was worshipped with sexual fertility rites. Many nude statues of her have been uncovered by archaeologists and the Bible refers to her fertility poles or rods on many occasions. Her cult must have been very popular, as it even swayed (or corrupted) the heart of the wise King Solomon (I Kings 11:5).

When the people of Israel practiced sacrificing their children to Molech, Yahweh through the prophet Jeremiah denounced them this way in Jer. 32:35—"They built high places ... to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech, though I never commanded them, nor did it enter my mind, that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin."

(<https://www.redlandsdailyfacts.com/2007/01/11/baal-ashtoreth-and-molech-gods-old-testament-rivals>)

Imagine you are sharing your religious and customary practices with a neighbour. And he says to you, "My religious and customary practices require my wife and me to sacrifice our 1st born son. And if we obey, we will be blessed with many more sons and children to come. Also, my wife and I can exercise sexual freedom with others from time to time as part of our spiritual intimacy with our god as well as spiritual blessing in material productivity and sexual potency/fertility."

I am sure you will find such practices detestable, even in the name of whatever deity. So it is little wonder that Yahweh had always required His people to separate from their neighbours—not because He's an "atas" or anti-social or racist God who didn't want His people to disrepute themselves with these "lowly" people, but He wanted them to stay clear and clean, and not be influenced by the detestable practices of their pagan neighbours.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray in Matt. 6:13—"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." The Lord is NOT implying that God the Father will actively lead us into temptation. Rather, He is cautioning us of our fallen human tendency—i.e. without seeking God's guidance and guardianship we will be very vulnerable to falling into the temptation the evil one. Indeed, you and I are quite aware that between

bad influence and good influence, which side will often win the battle over us if we don't look to God to guide and guard us.

A man remarked to a stranger standing near him, "Just look at that young person with the short hair and blue jeans, smoking a cigarette with a beer bottle in hand. Is it a boy or a girl?"

The bystander angrily replied, "Of course, it's a girl! She's my daughter!"

The man apologized with great embarrassment, "Oh, please forgive me, sir. I had no idea you were her father."

The bystander replied even more angrily, "I'm not her father! I'm her mother!"

Indeed, you and I are quite aware that between bad influence and good influence, which side will often win the battle over us if we don't look to God to guide and guard us.

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/domino-effect-victor-yap-sermon-on-ot-judges-178960>)

Today, not many would endorse and embrace child sacrifice or free sex as their religious/customary practice. But we do have similar equivalents—e.g. abortion for the most trivial, convenient, and pragmatic reasons; neglecting the child in the name of work or even ministry; cohabitating in sexual intimacy but without any desire for faithful, long-term commitment to each other.

- Secondly, note that v. 2 says the people "have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them ..." Ezra was upset and appalled because the people of Israel had not kept their race holy and pure when they intermarried their pagan neighbours. Now, if you call Ezra a racist, then Yahweh whom Ezra was to worship and obey, would be racist too. So is God racist?

To be objective, God had not always disapproved of intermarriages between His people and those of other race/ethnicity in the OT. For example:

- Moses married the daughter of a Midianite priest.
- Jacob married Leah and Rachel, who were related to him, but he also married their two maids who were not related.
- Jacob's son Judah, the ancestor of King David and the Messiah to come, married a Canaanite.

- Boaz, another ancestor of King David, married Ruth a Moabite.
- King Solomon, David's son, married the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt and hundreds of other non-Israelite women (the Bible pointed him out for wrongdoing only in his old age when he allowed his foreign wives to turn him to their gods).
- Joseph, son of Jacob, married the daughter of an Egyptian priest.

Now, note that this is not a “blanket statement” to say that God did not disapprove all intermarriages between His people and others in the OT. In fact, in Deut. 7:3-4, Yahweh commanded and prohibited His people strongly from intermarrying other people with these words, “Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.”

The reason for this command/prohibition is not because of race or ethnicity, but because God knew that these other people would “turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you”. If you think of God as the perfect and heavenly Father to His children, then Deut. 7:3-4 are words of parental concern, not of parental persecution. God so commanded and prohibited His people not because He felt good as a dictatorial racist, but He desired the good for His children as their loving Father.

I remember when I was young, I went out with some classmates to have some fun one evening. I got back late and my father confronted me as I opened the door, “Why so late? Who were you with? What did you do?”

Next day, I told my classmates in school, “Wow ... no more late nights from now on. Last night, I faced parental persecution!”

Of course, my father was not exercising parental persecution, but really parental concern. If he was not concerned about me, he would not be asking all those questions because whether I had lived or died or gotten into trouble or stayed out of trouble, would not be of any concern and interest to him.

The reason why God did not seem to disapprove of the intermarriages in my earlier examples is because those foreigners who married into their respective Hebrew families became worshippers of Yahweh themselves. Conversely, the reason why God did disapprove of the intermarriages in Deut. 7:3-4 and Ezra 9:2 had to do with these foreigners continuing to be idolaters, and even led their respective

Hebrew family members into compromising their holy and pure devotion to Yahweh worship and into idolatry.

In other words, the emphasis in the OT on keeping the Hebrew race holy and pure is to avoid the dilution of Yahweh worship, in order that the devotion to Yahweh worship can continue to be practiced and passed on to future generations.

And such dilution of Yahweh worship was often very subtle:

- The non-Yahweh worshipper would not say, “Don’t give what you have to your God, but give them all to my god.”
- This person will also not say, “You give half of what you have to your God, and the remaining half to my god.”

Rather, this person will say in a very subtle and insidious way, “No need to give your first and best to your God. Just give to Him less than your best and stuff you don’t want. It’s OK.”

The OT tells us that God calls and expects us to offer our first fruits and unblemished sacrifices to Him—i.e. our first and our best. If we are compromised to dilute our worship of Him to the point that we offer to Him less than our best and stuff we don’t want, we make Him like a “garang guni” man; we make Him not the God of over all, but the God of leftovers.

I hope by now you have a clearer understanding and appreciation of the deeper reasons behind the great grief of Ezra. He’s not “atas” or anti-social or racist. And neither is God Himself. The deeper reasons why God commanded separation of His people from their neighbours, and why He prohibited intermarriages between His people and their neighbours were because of two dangers His people would face if they had intermarried and integrated themselves with their neighbours:

1. The danger of being influenced by things not pleasing to God.
2. The danger of being diluted in their holy and pure devotion to God.

Back to renewal and rebuilding. Where do we begin this process of renewal and rebuilding? We learn from Ezra that it begins with grief. Next, we find that grief comes hand in hand with ...

II. The Response of Confession (vv. 5-15)

In vv. 5-6, Ezra arose when it was time for the evening sacrifice; signifying that he’s done with his grieving and about to move onto another phase of his response to the news he’d heard—i.e. his confession. He fell to his knees, lifted his hands to the Lord, and confessed the great sin of his people. Note

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that he identified himself with them in his prayer of confession, although he had not sinned with them in this instance.

Many years ago, a correspondent of the London Times was reporting on many of the same problems that we now have in our world today. He ended every article with the question, “What’s wrong with the world?”

G. K. Chesterton, the late English writer and lay theologian, wrote a brief reply:

Dear Editor, What’s wrong with the world? I am.

Faithfully yours,
G. K. Chesterton.

Biblical confession doesn’t excuse oneself.

Ezra’s prayer of confession reveals that he did not regard himself as more righteous or spiritually superior than the others. Thus, he did not pray judgmentally or proudly by pointing a finger at the people of Israel. Instead, he identified with them for he recognized that unless the grace of God was upon him, he would be just as vulnerable to sin as the others. Here, we see that Ezra is not like the Pharisee who prays in Luke 18:12-11—“God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” The Pharisee here is not confessing, but boasting in self-praise and even engaging in self-worship. Rather, Ezra is like the tax collector who prays in Luke 18:13, not even looking up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

This is the broken and contrite spirit that the Lord is looking for in confession—no self-praise pride, no self-righteous attitude, no judgmental spirit. In fact, it is interesting to note that no animal sacrifices were made even it was time for the evening sacrifice. Instead, what was offered by Ezra for himself and on behalf of the people was an offering of a broken spirit and a contrite heart. Ezra must have recalled the words of Psalm 51:16-17—“You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

So, do we want our confession to be pleasing and acceptable to the Lord? If we do, then DON’T START with these:

- Don’t start with more giving of our material stuff—such giving is not unimportant, but God is not so poor that He needs us to support Him materially with a big budget.

- Don't start with higher attendance in church—such attendance is not unimportant, but the angels and all of creation will still declare God's majesty and glory in worship even if you and I are absent in church.
- Don't start with greater participation in church ministry—such participation is not unimportant, but God doesn't depend on us to get His work done with us getting busier in church.

Yes! Don't start with all these. Instead, start with our heart—i.e. offer to God the brokenness and contrition of our inner life. If we want to renew and return to God, our greatest enemy is not the world out there. Our greatest enemy is really right here ... within our heart—we are often our greatest enemy. If we want to stand with God and for God, we must first win it not out there in the world, but right here ... within our heart.

Thus, one essential feature in a confession that is pleasing and acceptable to God is this: we must start with coming before God with a contrite heart and broken spirit as a result of our godly grief.

So Ezra grieved over the sin of the people, and then he confessed it without setting himself apart from the people, without judging the people, and without excusing himself before God.

In his confession, Ezra said in vv. 10, 11, 12, 14:

10 But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands 11 you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: "The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.

12 Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance."

14 Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?

Note that Ezra's strong response to the sin he heard was more than just because he thought it was sinful, or other people viewed it as sinful, or the society/culture then considered it as sinful. Rather, Ezra viewed what he heard as sin because he recognized that God through His divine Law and inspired prophets of old had denounced it as sinful.

Today, the one who is most vocal with his opinions often wins the day. So, black can become white if the most opinionated and vocal person manages to

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silence the rest. But an act is a sin or not a sin not because the most opinionated and vocal person has won, but whether God Himself in His Word has categorically called it a sin or not a sin.

Also, our feelings can deceive us. We often heard of this saying, “How can it be wrong when it feels so right? So, I follow my heart!” I want to caution that feelings are important, BUT feelings are not a sin-proof basis for determining right and wrong. Jer. 17:9 warns that “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

Some have advocated that we should follow our conscience—i.e. if we are at peace with our own conscience, then that must be the right thing to do. Now know this—the conscience is only reliable to the degree that it has been informed and shaped by Scripture, and not by culture.

So we do not deny or diminish what God Himself in His Word has revealed as sin. But I have a caution for all of us—i.e. do not mistake man-made preferences or practices as God’s commands, and dogmatically impose these on others. We can mistake man-made rules as God’s commands if these are not specifically spelt out in Scripture as God’s commands. E.g. in my church we prefer to use the ESV Bible for our preaching. I understand that in this church, you prefer the NIV. So as I preach before you today, I am doing so using the NIV. This is not to say that I am inconsistent, but I want to identify with you in your preference as a guest preacher who is graciously invited by you. Some may find one English version of the Bible helpful in understanding and applying the Word in their walk with the Lord. However, this may not necessarily be equally helpful to others.

Rom. 14:1-4 encapsulates this application principle with these words—“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

This brings me to a second essential feature in a confession that is pleasing and acceptable to God, and that is: we must acknowledge and recognize sin exactly as Scripture has revealed it to us.

In the original command, God explained the reason for the prohibition against intermarriage—“For they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods” (Deut. 7:4; also Exod. 34:16). God knew the tendency of fallen human nature. We see that rather than influencing their spouses to abandon their idols and follow the one true God, the Israelites were guilty of mixing pagan idolatry with their worship of God.

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And this has always been a major problem for God's people. We don't blatantly deny Christianity. Rather we add to our faith the beliefs and practices of the world, and then we become indistinguishable from the world in our thinking and living.

In his confession, Ezra continued in vv. 8, 13, 14, 15 with one word particularly repeated—i.e. the word “remnant”.

8 But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage.

13 What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this.

14 Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?

15 O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.

Here, Ezra acknowledged God's grace and mercy in not judging His people according to their unfaithfulness, but even preserved a remnant who could return to their homeland in Jerusalem.

The OT has recorded accounts of God preserving a remnant of His own. These were people who were kept safe by God from His judgment on the sin of humanity. E.g.:

- Noah and his family entering the ark before the Flood came (Gen. 7:11-13).
- Lot and his family fleeing from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:12-24).
- The Israelites crossing the Red Sea safely before the waters flowed back to drown the Egyptian army (Ex. 14:21-30).

One thing common to these people preserved by God is that they were kept by God to fulfil His purpose through them, ordinary and imperfect they might be. In other words, God's purpose is to use these people to demonstrate His character and will in this world. Thus, these remnant people represent hope with the promise and possibility of restoration.

That's why Ezra was so deeply and bitterly ashamed and upset when he heard of what the exiles (the remnant) had done over the years—they had failed to demonstrate God's character and will, and influence their neighbours as God's "salt and light".

But in spite of the people's unfaithfulness, Ezra also spoke of hope in God's grace and mercy to His people.

8 "... the LORD our God has been gracious ... giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage.

9 Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

13 What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved ...

15 O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! ... Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."

Indeed, we cannot fault Ezra for being so deeply and bitterly ashamed and upset when he heard of what the exiles (the remnant) had done over the years—they had failed to demonstrate God's character and will, and influence their neighbours as God's "salt and light".

As Ezra confessed in v. 15, "Righteous God, we are here still standing before your presence in our guilt when we should be dead in your presence." Indeed, God's purpose is to keep His people and use them to demonstrate His character and His will in this world. But because God also knows that these people are ordinary and imperfect in their humanity, He chooses to remain gracious and merciful, and even to continue to use them as they renew and rebuild themselves. And because of this truth, God's "remnant" people always represent hope with the promise and possibility of restoration for themselves and for the world.

In a sense, you and I who are in Christ today are like the "remnant" in the OT. Christ calls us to be His "salt and light" here on earth. We are called to demonstrate and preserve God's standard regardless of what we see happening around us. Christ has called and placed us here to represent the hope of restoration and salvation in Him.

So I have for you the third and final essential feature in a confession that is pleasing and acceptable to God, and that is: we come not with excuses but with humility to seek the Lord to renew and rebuild us in His faithful grace and mercy.

Conclusion

At this juncture, I like us to understand Ezra 9:2 more deeply and clearly by looking at it in parallel with 2 Cor. 6:14.

Ezra 9:2 reads, “They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.”

2 Cor. 6:14 reads, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”

The verse in the NT is often interpreted as Paul specifically commanding believers not to marry non-believers. I believe this is a narrow view of the wide range of relationships implied in this verse. Paul seems to have more than marriage in mind.

- Yoking is an agricultural metaphor. The picture is of two different kinds of animals (e.g. an ox and a mule) yoked to the same plough. One might be bigger and stronger than the other, and will dominate the weaker one.
- This caution can be applied in various relationship contexts—e.g. marriage with a person of other-faith, business partnership with an unbeliever who’s obsessively money-minded, workplace relationship with an unbelieving colleague with poor work ethics, close friendship with a believer indulging in destructive social habits. So the caution is actually to act against starting a deep, emotional relationship/partnership/friendship with an unbeliever that can potentially end up in a commitment that’s very difficult or traumatic for a believer to break.
- Thus the verse actually serves more like a general principle rather than a specific prohibition—i.e. act prayerfully with God’s discernment and wisdom so that if you have not started, don’t; if you have started, know your boundaries, and where and when to draw the line—don’t let the relationship go a step too far.

So can a believer start a relationship with an unbeliever, even with marriage in mind? We live in a free world where everybody can freely decide on his/her own actions or choices in life. So I will not tell you that you cannot do this or that. But I will say this—“If you decide to start such a deep, emotional

relationship, be aware that there are potentially many challenges you have to face. Also you must be prepared to take responsibility of the consequences, for better or worse.” I believe God allows you and me to exercise the free choice to decide. At the same time, He also holds you and me accountable and responsible for the consequence(s) of our decision(s).

Some of the challenges in an interfaith marriage are the results of common miscalculations that people tend to deny or diminish:

1. Ignoring the religious differences and not realizing that these can be potential trigger points in relationship conflicts. E.g. ambiguities related to children’s religious upbringing thereby causing them to be confused in their faith orientation, involvement in church, and celebration of religious festivities.
2. Taking a “love conquers all” attitude, and then discovering that “love is blind but marriage is an eye-opener”. When the novelty wanes and fades with time, we then see and have to deal with the imperfections of each other. And it is difficult to discuss, resolve, and pray over issues during such times without a common faith to anchor in.
3. Trying to “convert” the unbelieving partner as if it is a divine calling. Research has revealed that it is usually the believing spouse who has ended up being influenced by the unbelieving partner—becoming indifferent to one’s own faith, or frustrated when attempts to win over the unbelieving partner proved futile.
4. Privatizing religious belief to oneself. In time to come, the believer ends up feeling lonely and unsupported in his/her spiritual life—e.g. giving in so much to accommodate the unbelieving partner that the believing spouse loses his/her faith convictions and traditions, and even self-respect.

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary of the NT lays down this one safety principle related to “unequally yoked”—“Do not start or continue any relationship with unbelievers that would very likely lead you to compromise Christian standards or jeopardize Christian witness.”

Let me close our time with this take-away point—“Renewal begins with grieving over and confessing with a contrite heart and broken spirit where we have come short before God honestly, humbly, and without excuses.”

Let’s seek the Lord to help us do so. Amen!

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to you this day to seek a fresh, new perspective. Not to throw away past lessons, but for your Spirit to renew and breathe new life into our faith.

Show us how to do this. Help us open ourselves completely to your voice; the voice that tells us that God is love and in Christ all things are new.

Renew and restore us firmly yet gently for you know our frailties. Make us more mature and steadfast in your ways. Help our love and joy in you grow deeper so that we can be more grateful in our receiving, more generous in our giving, and more spiritually vibrant and obedient in our living.

We pray all this in the never failing and ever faithful name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen!

Reflect & Apply

1. What are some things that you as an individual and as a church have failed in obedience to God's Word? To what degree should you grieve over these things without being trapped in a spirit of hopelessness and helplessness?
2. Our confession that is pleasing and acceptable to God should bear these essential features:
 - We must first come before God with a contrite heart and broken spirit.
 - We must acknowledge and recognize sin exactly as Scripture has revealed it to us.
 - We come not with excuses but with humility to seek the Lord to renew and rebuild us in His faithful grace and mercy.

Reflect on these features, and consider how you can demonstrate each of these in your journey towards renewal and rebuilding as an individual and as a church.