

LESSON 36

Ezra 9:1-2

Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass.

In verses 1-2, the princes approach Ezra to tell him about a problem involving foreign marriages.

Already Ezra's campaign to teach people the Law was bearing "the characteristic fruit of reform." That is, the people had been taught the word of God, and that word had been "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness!" (2 Timothy 3:16)

Apparently, these same princes had either not tried to solve the problem themselves or had tried but had been unable to solve the problem themselves prior to Ezra's arrival. And perhaps a big reason for the failure of the princes to correct the problem is revealed in verse 2 - some of the princes were the chief offenders!

Who were these princes? Most likely they were the family leaders of the descendants of the Jews who had returned 80 years earlier under Sheshbazzar.

Four months have passed since they arrived. Ezra 10:9 will tell us that we are now in the 9th month, and Ezra 7:8 tells us that Ezra arrived in the 5th month.

That timing creates a big question for us: why did it take so long for Ezra to notice the foreign marriages? And, in fact, the question is even bigger than that because Ezra did not notice this problem himself, but rather Ezra was told about this problem, and we will see Ezra's shock and dismay in verse 3.

Why the delay, and why did Ezra fail to see a problem that would seem to be very evident? Had Ezra had his head buried in his scrolls?

I think the first few words in verse 1 answer our questions - "now when these things were done." What things?

Those things likely included the delivery of the commissions to the satraps and the governors that we saw in Ezra 8:36. And how long did that take? Possibly about four months, and particularly if there were a number of satraps located far apart whom Ezra needed to visit.

The most likely explanation for the delay is that Ezra had been traveling after his arrival to visit the officials in the surrounding areas, and Ezra had just now returned four months later. And most likely Ezra had left some behind to begin teaching the law to the people, which would then explain the turnaround we are seeing here.

So let's move on to our next logical question: what was wrong with these foreign marriages? That question is easy to answer.

For starters, marriages between the Israelites and certain foreign nations were specifically prohibited under the Law of Moses.

Exodus 34:11-16 - Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.

Deuteronomy 7:1-4 - When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled

against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

And not only do these passages prohibit these foreign marriages, but they also supply the reason for the prohibition – the foreign marriages would turn the Jews away from following God.

The influence of the foreign wife would turn the husband and the children to her foreign gods and would introduce her foreign worship and idolatry into the worship of God. And, of course, we see that very thing happening over and over again throughout the Old Testament.

The issue here was not an issue of racial purity but rather was an issue of religious purity.

How do we know it was not a racial issue?

Because Joseph had an Egyptian wife, because Moses married a Midianite and a Cushite, and because Ruth, a Moabitess, and Rahab, a Canaanite, hold honored positions in Jesus' genealogy.

God accepted marriages to foreign **believers**. The problem was when the marriage was to a foreign **unbeliever**. Such foreign wives could and often did lead the people away to foreign gods, particularly when, as here, the problem had become so widespread.

The phrase "holy seed" in verse 2 also shows us that the issue was one of religion rather than one of race – God's concern was not just for seed, but rather was for **holy** seed. That phrase is a clear link to the phrase "holy people" that is used throughout Deuteronomy in reference to the Israelites (7:6; 14:2, 21; 28:9).

Deuteronomy 7:6- For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.

Now that we have looked at one hot button issue (race), let's look at another hot button issue (gender)!

The emphasis here in Ezra is on the fact that the **male** Jews had married **female** foreigners. Why the emphasis on foreign **women**? Had no Jewish women married foreign unbelieving men?

First, even today, mothers often have a greater influence on their children's religion than do fathers. Later Jewish tradition decreed that a Jew is one who is born of a Jewish mother. (Remember Timothy

in Acts 16:1-3.) That ruling was not because of the blood of the child but rather was because it was the mothers who raised the children.

Second, a Jewish woman who married a foreigner would leave to become part of his nationality and to adopt his gods. What that means is that it was very unlikely that there were many or even any foreign unbelieving men with Jewish wives who were still a part of the Jewish community. Those women had all left already, and while that was not good, there was not much Ezra could do about it.

Let's drill down a bit on the specific foreign peoples who are listed in verse 1. The list in verse 1 is similar to those we saw earlier in Exodus and Deuteronomy: the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

Who were these nations? And as we answer that question, let's keep in mind that it was from these groups that some of the Jewish men were getting their wives!

The first group mentioned is the Canaanites.

The Canaanites were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham. The Canaanites lived along the eastern Mediterranean coastal regions from Egypt to Lebanon (Numbers 13:29). Their most significant impact on Israel came in the area of religion. The chief god of the Canaanites was Baal, and the Canaanite fertility cult has been called "the most immoral and vile religion known to man." The Canaanites worshiped their gods by engaging in sexual immorality involving male and female prostitutes and by sacrificing their children. Israel's worship of Baal seems to have been the most significant sin among those that led to the nation's deportation (Jeremiah 11:17; Hosea 2:1-13; 11:2; Zephaniah 1:4).

The second group mentioned is the Hittites.

The Hittites were the descendants of Heth, the son of Canaan (Genesis 10:15). The Hittites dominated Asia Minor, and groups of Hittites migrated south, eventually settling in the hill country of Canaan near the city of Hebron (Genesis 23:19; Numbers 13:29). Notable Hittites include Ephron, from whom Abraham purchased a burial site (Genesis 23), and Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1). Esau married two Hittites (Genesis 26:34), and Solomon had Hittite women in his harem (1 Kings 11:1).

The third group mentioned is the Perizzites.

The origin of the Perizzites is unknown. They first appear in Genesis 13:7, where they are simply identified as dwelling in the land of Canaan along with the Canaanites at the time of Abraham. During the period of the judges they lived in the heavily forested region near Mount Ephraim in the territory allotted to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (Joshua 17:15).

The fourth group mentioned is the Jebusites.

The Jebusites were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham (Genesis 10:16). They lived in the hill country (Numbers 13:29) and were the original inhabitants of Jerusalem. Jebusite Jerusalem was taken by King David in about 1004 BC. During the period of the judges, the Jebusites lived in the general region of Jerusalem in the territory allotted to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Notable Jebusites include Adoni-zedek, the king of Jerusalem who formed the alliance against Gibeon (Joshua 10:1-4), and Araunah (also known as Ornan), from whom David bought the threshing floor that would become the site of Solomon's temple (2 Samuel 24:16-24; 1 Chronicles 21:14-27). If Salem is identified as Jerusalem, then Melchizedek may have been a Jebusite (Genesis 14:18).

The fifth group mentioned is the Ammonites.

The Ammonites were the descendants of Ben-ammi, the son of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his younger daughter. The Ammonites lived on the eastern side of the Jordan River. The earliest documentation of hostilities between the Ammonites and the Israelites is the record of Judges 3:12-14, where the Ammonites join the coalition formed by Eglon, king of Moab. Jephthah later defeated an unnamed king of Ammon (Judges 11). Notable Ammonites include Naamah, the wife of Solomon and mother of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:21, 31; 2 Chronicles 12:13), and Tobiah, one of the major antagonists of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:19; 4:3). Solomon built a sanctuary for Molech, the "detestable" chief god of the Ammonites, on the Mount of Olives (1 Kings 11:7). Child sacrifice was a significant part of the Ammonite Molech cult (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35).

The sixth group mentioned is the Moabites.

The Moabites were the descendants of Moab, the son of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter. The Moabites lived on the eastern side of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, just to the south of the Ammonites. The chief god of the Moabites was Chemosh (1 Kings 11:7, 33). The worship of Chemosh included a priesthood (Jeremiah 48:7) and a sacrificial system (Numbers 22:40; 25:2). Solomon married Moabite women and built a sanctuary for Chemosh on the Mount of Olives (1 Kings 11:1, 7). Notable Moabites include: Balak, the king who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22-24); Eglon, the king who was assassinated by Ehud (Judges 3:15-30); Ruth, the widow

of Mahlon and wife of Boaz (Ruth 4:10, 13); and Mesha, the king who rebelled against King Jehoram of Israel (2 Kings 3).

The seventh group mentioned is the Egyptians.

The most significant feature of the land of Egypt is the Nile River. In fact, Egypt is often called “the gift of the Nile.” Because the Nile River flows from south to north, southern Egypt is known as Upper Egypt while northern Egypt is known as Lower Egypt.

The Egyptians may be the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah. The land of Egypt is sometimes identified as the land of Ham in the Old Testament (Psalm 78:51; 105:23, 27; 106:22). Like Israel, Egypt was a land of religion. Herodotus wrote: “They [the Egyptians] are beyond measure religious, more than any other nation. ... Their religious observances are, one might say, innumerable.”

The chief god of the Egyptians was Ra, the sun god. However, many other gods were routinely worshiped including Osiris, god of the Nile, and Isis, goddess of children. And, of course, they considered the Pharaohs to be gods. Notable Egyptians include Shishak, the pharaoh who invaded Israel during the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25-26), and Neco, the pharaoh who met Josiah in battle at Megiddo, a battle in which Josiah was fatally shot by the Egyptian archers (2 Kings 23:29; 2 Chronicles 35:22-23).

The eighth and final group mentioned is the Amorites.

They were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham (Genesis 10:16). The Amorites lived to the west of Mesopotamia and so were called “westerners.” The Amorites had their origins in Syria and migrated south into the land of Canaan. The Amorites lived in the hill country on both sides of the Jordan River (Numbers 13:29; Joshua 5:1). The so-called King’s Highway traversed their territory (Numbers 21:21-22). They were largely nomadic shepherds, supplying sheep and goats to the Canaanite cities. Notable Amorites include Sihon and Og, two kings who were defeated by the Israelites on their way to the promised land (Numbers 21).

Why did we spend so much time talking about these peoples? Because it is important to know who they were and what they believed as we approach the final scene in this book, which involves a punishment that (absent this background information) some might consider overly harsh.

So where are we then at the end of verse 2? Ezra has just been told about the problem of intermarriage that was occurring among the remnant in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities. The

idolatry that led to the exile had been caused in large part by the idolatry that had come in through intermarriage, and here are God's people once again engaged in intermarriage with idolaters. How will Ezra react to that news? We see that starting in verse 3?

Ezra 9:3-4

3 And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished. 4 Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

These verses show us the effect that the news of the people's infidelity had on Ezra – he tore his garments, he pulled out his hair, and he sat down astonished (dumbfounded, overcome, or appalled). Ezra was certainly not apathetic when it came to sin, and he wanted everyone around him to know that.

Why was Ezra so upset by their sin? It seems that many of the others, including at least some of the leaders, were not upset at all. Why was Ezra different?

Because Ezra understood the seriousness of sin. Sin such as this was the reason the Jews had been exiled in the first place – and here they were doing it again! Ezra must have wondered if the people would ever learn!

But why did Ezra understand this, while many and perhaps most of the others did not? Because Ezra studied the law, and he knew the law.

If we don't take sin seriously today, is it perhaps because we don't study and know the word of God? Perhaps our view of the seriousness of sin is directly proportional to our knowledge and understanding of God's word. That certainly seems to have been the case with Ezra.

How do we react to sin? Do we just shrug our shoulders and write it off as just human nature, or do we react like Ezra did? Are we astonished by sin?

We can see a big difference here between Ezra and Nehemiah.

When Ezra hears about this sin, he pulls out his own hair in verse 3. In Nehemiah 13:25, here is how

Nehemiah responded when he, too, was faced with the same problem: “And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off **their** hair.” **Ezra pulls out his own hair while Nehemiah pulls out the hair of the offenders!**

I suppose there is a time to pull out your own hair, and a time to pull out other people’s hair! (Although I don’t remember seeing hair-pulling anywhere on the list in Ecclesiastes 3!)

Ezra sat where he was until the time of the evening sacrifice (about 3 PM), and this reference to the evening sacrifice suggests that Ezra had probably taken a seat near the temple. That is, Ezra had intentionally positioned himself in a public place so that the people could see his grief.

Ezra was joined by those who realized that the Jews were in danger of once again suffering the judgment of God. The phrase “every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel” in verse 4 refers to those who were attempting to live according to the Law of Moses.

Isaiah 66:2 – But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.

Earlier we asked whether we are astonished by sin. Now we can ask whether we tremble at the word of God. I suspect the answers to those two questions are the same.

So where are we at the end of verse 4? Ezra is upset. Ezra is overcome. Ezra is worried. So what does Ezra do? Ezra prays.

Ezra 9:5-7

5 And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, 6 And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. 7 Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.

In verse 5, Ezra, falls upon his knees and spreads out his hands unto God.

Verses 6-15 give us Ezra's prayer, and his prayer is centered around two things - a confession of sin and the importance of the Jewish remnant.

We can compare this prayer of Ezra in Ezra 9 to the great prayer of Daniel in Daniel 9 and to the prayer of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 9. (Chapter 9 seems to be the prayer chapter!)

Confession of sin is a major theme of this prayer.

We see a first confession of sin in verses 6-7, and we will see a second confession of sin later in verses 10-14.

Ezra uses two metaphors in verse 6 to describe their sin – “for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.”

The switch from the first person singular in verse 6 (“I am ashamed”) to the first person plural in verses 6-7 (“our iniquities are increased” and “we been in a great trespass”) is interesting.

Ezra identifies himself with his people and with the sin of his people. Ezra did not come into Jerusalem to accuse them as an outsider – Ezra was instead standing with the people and describing their sins as “our” sins and “our” guilt. This scribe was praying the Publican's Prayer!

In verse 7, Ezra looks back through their history – and Ezra recognizes that it has been a history of sin and rebellion against God. And Ezra understands that their exile had been caused by that sin and rebellion.

“It is as if Ezra has realized that immediately in front of him are all the cumulative iniquities which have heaped up through history. What an extraordinary view of sin!”

The phrase “the kings of the lands” in verse 7 is a reference to the kings of Assyria and Babylon who were used by God to exile and scatter his people.

God's judgment of the Jews in verse 7 is described as including warfare (“sword”), exile (“captivity”), the loss of their possessions (“spoil”), and the loss of their national pride (“confusion of face”). And in verse 7, Ezra tells us that their humiliation was continuing to this very day.

Humiliation by foreign kings was nothing new for the Jews and would continue to be nothing new. After the conquest by Babylon, the Jews were under the rule of the Persians, under the rule of

Alexander the Great, under the rule of the Ptolemies, under the rule of the Seleucids, under the rule of the Romans, under the rule of the Byzantines, under the rule of the Arabs, under the rule of the Turks, and under the rule of the British. The Jews have enjoyed only two periods of independence after their exile by Nebuchadnezzar: their modern state (since 1948) and from 165 to 63 BC following the Maccabean Revolt. One of those (and only one of those) is mentioned in the Bible - the Maccabean revolt, which is found, for example, in the great prophecy of Daniel 11.

In verse 6, Ezra says, "I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God."

While Ezra was blushing because of the sins of others, Jeremiah 6:15 describes a people who did not blush even about their own sin.

Jeremiah 6:15 - Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush.

Into which category do we fall? Into which category does our society fall?

That second question is easy. We live in a society that has been taught from a young age to never feel any shame – and we are now reaping that whirlwind. We live in a society that does not know how to blush.

In 1939, a single four-letter word in the movie "Gone With the Wind" made the entire nation blush. That was 84 years ago. What does it take to make this nation blush today? Do we even know? Where will this nation be 84 years from today?

Our mission as the Lord's church is to proclaim the gospel to the world. But no one will ever believe the good news until they first believe the bad news – and the bad news is that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death.

Why would anyone pay any attention to the gospel if that person does not believe he has ever sinned? Perhaps that more than anything explains why the gospel seems to fall on deaf ears these days – more so than at any time in our recent history.

We need to follow Ezra's example and blush both for our own sin and for the sins that are heaped up all around us in this sin-soaked world. If we in the church ever forget how to blush – who is left?

Ezra 9:8-9

8 And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. 9 For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

In verses 8-9, Ezra comes back to their current situation under the Persian kings. During the time of the Babylonian kings, the Jews had no hope of returning to Judah, but that situation changed when the Persian Empire took over.

The “little space” or “brief moment” in verse 8 was a period of about 80 years (from 538 to 458) starting with the decree of Cyrus during which the people had been allowed to return to Jerusalem.

Ezra understood that that door could close at any time. Yes, God opens doors, **but God also closes doors**. We should not presume those open doors will remain open forever, especially if we fail to walk through them.

We know of one great open door that is open now (the gates of the church in Revelation 21:25) but that door will close with a permanent thud on the final day of judgment when the day of repentance will be over forever. And that is not the only door that God will close. God opens doors and closes door today as well – and we need to use those open doors while they remain open.

In verse 8, Ezra also recognizes that they were a remnant, and that God had spared that remnant for a purpose.

And they were in fact just a remnant. Perhaps a few hundred thousand Jews lived in Israel during the time of Ezra. Millions had been killed or carried away into captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

The phrase “remnant to escape” in verse 8 suggests that this remnant included only those Jews who had escaped from the exile and who had returned to Judah. That is, the phrase suggests that those Jews who remained behind were not considered part of this remnant, at least not in the eyes of Ezra.

But perhaps Ezra considered those who remained behind and who were faithful to God to be a different remnant - keeping in mind that Ezra himself had been in that group up until recently, and

Nehemiah was still in that group.

But why would Ezra single out the exiles as a remnant within a remnant? The entire remnant was faithful to God because that is what it means to be a remnant, but the remnant in Jerusalem had come out of the exile, and that, I think, is the key point here.

This remnant includes those who had separated themselves and come out from the exile, and that is true of the remnant today as well.

2 Corinthians 6:17 - Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.

Verse 8 also mentions the “secure hold” or “foothold” that God had given this remnant. The KJV used the word “nail.” The literal Hebrew term is “tent peg,” and it refers to a place where a nomad could pitch his tent after a long journey.

“A little grace had been granted by God to his people; a small remnant had found its weary way back to its home and driven a single peg into the soil; a solitary ray of light was shining; a faint breath of freedom lightened their slavery.”

And again there is a question for us in Ezra’s prayer. Where have we driven our tent peg? Where is our nail planted?

Hebrews 6:19 - Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil.

Finally, verse 8 says that their eyes were brightened and that they were revived in their slavery. The people were dead while in exile, but now they had been revived. Yet many Jews remained in exile, which Ezra describes as slavery in verse 9. And yet again we can see a parallel with our own situation.

Galatians 5:1 - Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

But verse 9 also tells us that God had not forsaken them, even in their slavery, but “hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia.” God had demonstrated his love to them even while they were in exile. And what about us?

Romans 5:8 - But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

We often say that we can find Jesus on every page in the Old Testament. On this page, Jesus is in every verse!

In this return from exile we see a beautiful prefiguring of the gospel of Christ – and when we read the prophecies of Zechariah I think we can see that this was one of the big lessons that God wanted his people to learn from the exile. Someone was coming!

#ezra-esther