

LESSON 37

Verse 9 reminds us that this remnant had a purpose: “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.”

Some argue, based on this verse, that the temple had been destroyed during the reign of Xerxes and was rebuilt again during the time of Ezra, but most likely the rebuilding in verse 9 refers to the earlier rebuilding under Cyrus and Darius (which all occurred during the “little space” of verse 8).

Some have argued from the use of the word “wall” in verse 9 that when Ezra arrived the wall around the city must have already been constructed. From this they argue that Ezra must have arrived **after** Nehemiah built the wall, and they rearrange the chronology accordingly.

But there are several problems with that view.

First, Ezra was in fact rebuilding the physical wall. Remember what we saw in Chapter 4, when Ezra went forward in time to show examples of hostility from their neighbors. One of those examples was a letter that their neighbors wrote to King Artaxerxes (the current king) that caused him to stop work on the wall. They did more than stop work on the wall, they destroyed the wall. That wall was being built by Ezra. The destruction of that wall was the report that Nehemiah received in Nehemiah 1:3 that led to his own return. So, the fact that Ezra mentions a wall does not mean that Ezra showed up after Nehemiah.

But, second, the word translated “wall” here is the Hebrew word for “fence,” and it does not usually refer to a city wall, but rather refers to a stone fence that forms a border between property owners. It simply means a protected area. In fact, that usage seems likely here from how the word is used in verse 9 – “to give us a wall **in Judea** and Jerusalem.” How could a city wall have been built around all of Judea? A better translation of that phrase may be the one found in the ESV: “and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.”

Ezra 9:10-12

10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments,
11 Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness. 12 Now

therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever.

Verses 10-12 of Ezra's prayer are directed to Ezra's listeners as well as to God, causing one commentator to describe the prayer as a "sermon prayer."

Ezra wanted the people to understand that all the disasters that had befallen them as a people had happened because of their disobedience to God's commands, and so Ezra uses the language of the Bible to help them understand that crucial point.

I have heard criticism of public prayers that some are more like sermons than like prayers and that some quote the Bible back to God even though God wrote the Bible. This one prayer from Ezra 9 shows us that neither of these criticisms is valid. Ezra's prayer looks a lot like a sermon - yes, Ezra was speaking to God, but Ezra was also speaking to those who were hearing his prayer. And Ezra's prayer quotes the Bible back to God - as do many other prayers in the Bible. If I am limited in my prayers to telling God only those things that he does not know, then I'm not going to be able to say much in my prayers! And, even today, we can often tell from someone's prayer how well that person knows and loves the word of God!

Getting back to the content of Ezra's prayer, it is a sad commentary on our own modern society that the description in verse 11 is a very accurate description of our own country in its present state:

"an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness."

That is the land in which we live. The question is whether we will change that unclean land by proclaiming the gospel of Christ, or whether we will be changed by that unclean land. That was the issue in Ezra's day. That is still the issue in our own day. Will we change the world, or will we be changed by the world?

Which of the commandments of God had the people forsaken? The examples that Ezra gives in verses 11-12 come from Genesis, Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Lamentations, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, although the texts are not literally quoted.

Ezra 9:13-15

13 And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this; 14 Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldst not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping? 15 O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.

In verses 13-15, Ezra again focuses on the remnant.

Despite all that had happened to the Jews, Ezra understood that they had been punished far less than their iniquities deserved. They deserved death, but God had given them life. Where is the gospel in the Old Testament? A better question might be where isn't it!

Romans 6:23-For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God had earlier considered destroying the people and starting over instead with Moses.

Exodus 32:9-10-And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.

But God did not do that. The fact that the remnant even existed in the days of Ezra was itself evidence of God's love and God's grace. Absent that love and absent that grace, the Jews would have been destroyed long before.

But if this remnant sinned and rebelled, then it, too, was in danger of being destroyed. But even then God's plan would have continued. God could find another remnant – there were communities of Jews scattered all around, even down in Egypt.

In verse 15, Ezra says that “**we** cannot stand before thee because of this.”

The sin of some of the people was the responsibility of all the people, with the result that none of the people (Ezra included) could stand.

1 Corinthians 5:6-7 - Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.

A little leaven had leavened the whole lump. It was now Ezra's job to "clean out the old leaven" by taking steps to purify the remnant.

There is a clear message here for us: remnants have responsibilities!

The Lord's church is also a remnant. Do we understand what that means? Do we understand our own responsibilities? If the Lord's church turns its back on God's word, then who will be left? Will we cause God to look elsewhere for a faithful remnant?

Luke 18:8-Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

It is our responsibility to make sure the answer to that question is yes! If we don't take on that responsibility, who will?

Ezra 10:1

1 Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.

Verse 1 brings us back to the situation described in 9:3-5 and tells us what happened at the temple after Ezra's prayer.

Notice that while Ezra 9 speaks of Ezra in the first person, Ezra 10 speaks of Ezra in the third person. Why the switch?

We don't know for sure, but one commentary suggests that this back and forth shift may have been intended to let the reader see the events from different perspectives. Another suggests that "the shift occurs to highlight the shared responsibility for the divorces among the various groups that supported the decision."

While Ezra prayed, he lay prostrate and weeping. "Casting himself down" in the Hebrew means that

Ezra kept “casting himself down” to the ground.

This activity caused a crowd to gather, no doubt wondering what had caused this important official to behave this way. By the time the prayer was completed and the events in Chapter 10 began, we are told that a very large crowd had gathered.

Ezra’s emotional state infected those around him, and by the end of verse 1 they were also weeping bitterly. Most had heard all or part of Ezra’s prayer, so they knew what was causing his great distress.

Ezra 10:2-4

2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing. 3 Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. 4 Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.

Shecaniah speaks out in verses 2-4. He was likely a leader of the people, as well as someone who agreed with Ezra over the problem of intermarriage. He also held Ezra in high esteem, calling him “my lord” in verse 3.

Shecaniah is identified in verse 2 as the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam. There are several other Shecaniahs mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah, but it is difficult to identify this Shecaniah with any of them. The length of Shecaniah’s genealogy in verse 2 indicates that he was a person of some importance.

From Chapter 2 we know that the family of Elam had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon with Zerubbabel and Jeshua. This family is also mentioned in 8:7 and 10:26, suggesting it was one of the more significant families among the returned exiles.

Note that Shecaniah uses the first person plural (“**we** have trespassed”) much like Ezra did in his prayer. Since Shecaniah is not listed among those who were guilty of this sin later in this chapter, he most likely was simply another faithful Jew like Ezra who had great concern for the spiritual welfare of his people.

His father was Jehiel, the son of Elam. If we look ahead to the list of men who were guilty of intermarriage, we again in verse 26 find Jehiel, the son of Elam. What that means is that Shecaniah is apparently denouncing his own father here in verses 2-4!

There is a lesson here for us. I think we have all known people who have conveniently changed their view about certain sins involving marriage when family members have fallen into those sins — Shecaniah was not such a person!

In verse 2, Shecaniah expresses hope that God might refrain from judging the nation if it repented and changed its ways, which he then encourages Ezra and the people to do. Yes, Shecaniah says, we have sinned, and yes, the sin has been great (“we have trespassed against our God”), but there was still hope. It was not too late to repent and make things right with God. But how?

In verse 3, Shecaniah tells them how: “Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them.”

The marriages were illegal, and there was one and only one solution to an illegal marriage – it must be ended. Both the foreign wives and the children from the mixed marriage must be put away, which presumably includes being sent back to where the wife had come from in the first place.

The phrase “put away” in verse 3 means divorce rather than just separation. It is the same word found in Deuteronomy 24:2 discussing divorce.

Deuteronomy 24:2-And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.

These marriages were sinful. Nehemiah makes that point very clear - they were a “great evil.”

Nehemiah 13:27 – Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?

To many and perhaps to most today, this solution seems very harsh. And there is a reason for that – it was very harsh, but it needed to be harsh. Why? Because something much more important was at stake.

Had the intermarriage continued, the Jewish race and the Jewish religion would have become

unrecognizable in just a few generations. God had a plan for the Jews, and that plan required that they maintain their purity and their faithfulness to God's law. This small group of Jews was surrounded by a large group of hostile, polytheistic neighbors that threatened to consume them – and that was a grave danger.

Ezra also knew the devastating problems that had come from the foreign marriages of Solomon and the kings who followed him. Drastic measures were called for in such a situation, and drastic measures were taken.

History tells us that other Jewish communities in exile gradually disintegrated. That happened, for example, to the Jews in Egypt that we have previously discussed. This event in Ezra 9 and 10 was a watershed moment in the history of God's people.

And for those who point to the departure of the children as being excessively harsh, perhaps they should have asked the departing mothers for their opinion.

In ancient societies (as today), when marriages were dissolved, the children typically went with the mother. The harshness of that edict was directed more to the fathers, who would likely never see their children again. But sin has consequences – both then and now – and, more often than not, those consequences affect the innocent along with the guilty – both then and now.

The command in verse 3 (and again later in verse 11) is that these men divorce their illegal foreign wives.

But I thought that Malachi 2:16 tells us that God hates divorce. Why is Ezra telling these men to do something that God hates?

To answer that question, Let's look more closely at what was going on in Malachi 2.

Malachi 2:11-16 - Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god. 12 The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts. 13 And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. 14 Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet

is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. 15 And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. 16 For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

So, yes, God hates divorce. **But the divorce God hates is the divorce from the wife on one's youth – not the divorce from the second wife.** Malachi calls these second marriages “an abomination” and says that the men involved have “profaned the holiness of the LORD” (Malachi 2:11).

Yes, God hates divorce, but Malachi is calling on these men to return to the wives of their youth. The first divorce was the **hated** divorce; the second divorce was a **commanded** divorce!

And these verses from Malachi (written about 25 years later) likely also tell us something important about the situation here in Ezra 10. Notice that Malachi 2:13 says that the people had done this thing **again**, perhaps pointing us back to the prior time they did it here in Ezra 10.

If what was happening in Malachi 2 was also happening in Ezra 10, then what does that tell us about what is happening here in Ezra 10? What it tells us is that for some and perhaps many of the men who were marrying foreign women in Ezra 10, this marriage was not their first marriage. Instead, they had divorced the wives of their youth so that they could marry these foreign women. In fact, it seems that Shecaniah's own father had divorced Shecaniah's mother so that he could marry a foreign unbeliever.

I think we see additional evidence for that conclusion in Ezra 9:2 - “And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” Does anyone really think that the officials and chief men were single? That is very unlikely. Almost certainly, these Jewish leaders had married while young, but were now casting away their wives so that they could marry these foreign women. We know that is what was happening later in Malachi 2. I think it was also happening here in Ezra 10.

So what does that mean? What it means is that we are not looking primarily here at younger men marrying for the first time, but we are looking primarily at older men marrying for the second time. That also makes sense from the perspective of the foreign women, who were much more likely to marry an older wealthier Jew than a younger Jewish man with neither position nor money. '

So, it seems that some and perhaps most of these men who were marrying foreign wives were abandoning their Jewish wives to do so. And so the complaint (still heard today) that Ezra was destroying families would have and should have fallen on deaf ears – **Ezra was not the home**

wrecker here! If anything, Ezra was trying to put the homes back together.

It was a violation of the law of Moses for any Jewish man to marry a foreign unbeliever, but many here had compounded that sin by forsaking the wife of their youth to marry that foreign woman. The command in Ezra 10 was for them to divorce their foreign wives.

Yes, but the second marriages involved children, and those children would be hurt by the divorce. And on and on the excuses go.

Yes, that is exactly what sin does – sin causes heartache and grief for all involved, and often for many who are not involved. Let's not blame that heartache and grief on God who told us not to become involved in the sin in the first place.

A man leaves his wife and his children to unlawfully marry someone else and have children with her. And that man is now complaining that God is the one causing heartache and grief? Give me a break! The heartache and the grief began as soon as that man departed from God's law of marriage given to all of mankind.

We might pause for a moment to consider what relevance, if any, these chapters in Ezra have with regard to current questions today about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Much could be said, but I will make just a few quick points on that issue.

First, the question often arises today about whether a remarriage without scriptural grounds should continue or should be dissolved.

Those who argue for its dissolution stress (rightfully) that one can hardly be said to have repented of a sin that one continues to engage in. If I steal a car and then become a Christian, can I keep the car? The answer is no. If restitution is possible, and you have not made restitution, then you have not repented.

Those who argue for the opposite view often say that God hates divorce, and so the marriage should continue, perhaps for the sake of the children.

First, as we just saw, the divorce God hates is the first divorce – the one that led to all of the problems in the first place.

Second, Ezra would seem to have something to tell us with regard to the view that the illegal

marriages should continue for the sake of the children. That was certainly not Ezra's view!

And as for the unlawful marriage continuing for the sake of the children, I fear that sometimes (as it seems here in Ezra 10) it is a bit late and a bit too convenient to suddenly start doing things for the sake of the children! If their welfare had been paramount all along, then perhaps the first marriage would never have been dissolved.

Here in Ezra 10 some of these men were marrying and then having children with women who practiced child sacrifice! Does anyone think the welfare of the children was their chief concern?

Many sermons and lessons on divorce and remarriage have been preached and written from the pages of Ezra, and I have no problem with using Ezra as a source for those sermons and lessons, but when I read or hear such lessons I think of what Abraham told Lazarus,

Luke 16:31 – If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

To paraphrase, I would say, “If they do not hear Jesus in Matthew 19:9, they will not be convinced by Ezra.”

And what does Matthew 19:9 say?

Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

One has to work pretty hard to misunderstand that verse! It certainly needs no clarification from Ezra.

The problem with issues about marriage is not a lack of clarity in God's word. The problem is a lack of will to do what God has clearly commanded with regard to marriage.

And those commands are not just for Christians. God's law of marriage was given in the garden, and it applies to all people everywhere.

Continuing to address Ezra, Shecaniah says in verse 4 what every leader wants to hear: “Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.” (We might want to remember this verse the next time our elders are faced with a difficult decision!)

Shecaniah recognizes the obvious – that it is the task of the leader to lead, but he tells Ezra that the people are with him. And he encourages Ezra to “be of good courage, and do it,” which is good advice for leaders in any generation. We don’t know whether Ezra needed this encouragement to act, but it certainly didn’t hurt.

Shecaniah was a man of action who recognized the urgency and seriousness of the situation. He knew what needed to be done, and he did what he could to see that it was done. He did what was right even when that meant going against a member of his own family. He encouraged his leaders to act when action was required. We should pray that God will continue to raise up Shecaniahs!

#ezra-esther