

### EZRA

#### Lesson 18, Chapter 9 Conclusion

Principle after principle, application after application erupts out of Ezra chapters 9 and 10 that are surprisingly illustrative of how modern Believers (Christian and Messianic) are to relate to God's laws and commandments. Ezra's era was almost a millennia apart from when God gave Moses the Law, and so Jewish society in 450 B.C. was as radically different from the days of the Egyptian exodus as Western society is today from the days of the Crusades. Thus it was a true challenge even in Bible times to properly apply the Law to each successive generation almost as much as it is for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So let's take a few minutes to gain some perspective for a better comparison between the issue of following God's laws and commandments in the days of Ezra versus how that same issue confronts us in modern times.

Because of their exile to Babylon, and the dramatically changed conditions that the Jews endured, they soon recognized that scrupulously following the Torah up in Babylon was not only impractical it was impossible. It was impossible not only from the standpoint that about one-third of the Law of Moses dealt with ritual issues that required a Temple and a Priesthood (now defunct), but also that other commandments concerned such matters as treatment of the land itself, and some of this only applied to the Promised Land, not any land. Certain important elements of kosher eating depended on how the land was treated otherwise it defiled the food that grew on it. The Sabbath year cycle for instance that gave a year's rest to the land played an important role in the ritual purity of the land, which transferred to the food supply that it produced. But from a practical viewpoint there was no way to observe the Sabbath year outside of Judah in a pagan controlled culture. And various other commandments made it crystal clear that it didn't matter where the Jews were located; they were to follow those regulations regardless. Quite the predicament.

So up in Babylon the Torah laws were essentially suspended; not by the Lord but by those who were supposed to teach them and abide by them. There is no record of this suspension being formal, but rather it resulted from a gradual adapting of the exiles to their circumstances and surroundings as for most Jews it became their new permanent home. And that adapting essentially meant the taking up of new religious practices, which was the earliest beginning of Judaism.

Back in Judah the relatively few Jews that were allowed by Nebuchadnezzar to stay there as caretakers also adapted to their new reality and they did so by accepting and incorporating the ways of the foreign power that ruled over them, and also the lifestyles and religions of the many foreigners who moved in to Judah to take advantage of the situation; including creating blended families of gentiles and Jews. There is no indication that the Jews of the Babylonian and Persian Diaspora or the Jews who had remained in Judah had a truly conscious sense of intending to fall away from Torah in order to create a new Jewish religion; it just happened in tiny unnoticeable increments, day by day (the classic frog in the kettle syndrome).

We saw this reality play out in the Book of Esther (exiles living in Persia) whereby God and prayer aren't mentioned even once. There we don't hear of Biblical festivals or Sabbath keeping, or any other observances of the daily Torah commandments or the lifestyle prescribed by God's laws. So the Jews of the Diaspora came back to Judah with an entirely new outlook on what constituted their Jewish religion. The first wave of exiles to return, led by Zerubbabel, came with that mindset, even though they also looked zealously towards rebuilding the Temple and beginning the Torah rituals again. Did their return to Judah reflect a great desire to reform their religion and recover God's Word, while shunning the ways of early Judaism that had been created up in Babylon? Or was the intent merely to add some especially precious Torah ordained worship elements back into their religious practices (sacrificing for example) that they had a historical memory of and longed to restart those rituals? No doubt it was a mixed bag.

So as we pick up with Ezra's return, some 80 years after the first wave of Jewish returnees led by Zerubbabel, we find him coming to Jerusalem for the express purpose of reforming whatever was now the official religion of the Jews (one which he greatly disagreed with) back into one that was Torah-based and thus more pure and Godly. Ezra and his group returned to a functioning Temple and Priesthood but instantly he was met with a startling reality; it is not so easy (and in some cases perhaps not possible) to turn back the clock especially when it comes to spiritual and religious matters. Here in America we Baby Boomers often reminisce about the Happy Days kind of lives we led as children of the 50's. And now, some 60 years later, we often talk about how much we wished that our grandchildren could live in that kind of carefree society and stable environment (and how we, too, would also like to return to those simple and gentler days), but the world has evolved so much that while reinstating some aspects of those times might be possible, those remnants are mostly cosmetic like retro furniture, drive-in theaters and hamburger joints with car hops and juke boxes. Sadly the underlying conditions simply don't exist any longer to effectively recreate what once was.

Thus Believers who today realize that our faith has taken so many strange twists and turns since the time of Christ, and some of those have been wrong turns that have led us away from God's Word, we've begun to recognize that although we'd like to turn back the clock we'll not regain the heady days like when Paul, or Peter or John lived; too much water has flowed under that bridge. Thus reform-based movements like Hebrew Roots of Christianity and Messianic Judaism are today grappling with how to recover the Godly idealism and directives

of the Torah (and all of God's Word for that matter) and how much of it can be reasonably applied to 21<sup>st</sup> century secular society and a church that while relying on Christ for salvation, looks nearly exclusively to the Apostle Paul as the authority for doctrine, practices, and behavior.

This is where we can learn much from Ezra (and later Nehemiah). They had the awareness, knowledge, desire, and means to institute reforms; but from where the world stood in their days, as compared to the days of Moses, just how much reform was actually possible despite the zealousness of a few leaders and the devotion of some of the people? Sometimes, from the human perspective, you can't put the Genie back into the bottle once he's loosed. And even if it is theoretically possible to completely reform an entire society or religion back to the purer and more moral ways, how much time, change and pain is any given population willing to endure to get there?

Let's reduce this to the matter at hand: the issue for Ezra was just how much of God's Torah could he reasonably expect to institute on the Jews of Judah considering how embedded were the ways of early Judaism in their everyday life and society, how much pagan gentiles had influenced the Jewish culture, and how far from God's Word they already were? Most Jews had little to no knowledge or experience with Torah based laws or living in a manner like their distant ancestors had lived. And the precise challenge that Ezra is faced with in chapters 9 and 10 must be the most emotionally gut-wrenching one imaginable: many of the marriages and resultant families that the Jews had formed over the past century were, in God's eyes, illegitimate because these marriages were between His people and foreign pagans. In fact these marriages represented fundamental unfaithfulness to the Lord, because they directly violated the Law of Moses (in principal, letter and spirit), and Malachi made it clear that this was an abomination that could not stand if harmony with God was to be regained and maintained.

Similarly in the year of our Lord 2014, as we look to rediscover the Torah and to flush-out manmade doctrines from our faith and our Christian institutions using the Living Water of the Holy Scriptures as a sort of spiritual solvent, we immediately run headlong into impediments that aren't so easily solvable by merely insisting that Believers ought to obey God's laws and commandments. Ezra, in facing the very same problem with the contemporary Jewish society of Judah, saw that these illicit marriages existed at every level of society, from the Priests on down, and to this point no one had seen them as anything but normal and good. But now Ezra had to take action against these unions. What might that action be? Since the Law of Moses doesn't directly address this problem of what to do IF the commandment against illicit marriages is violated then Ezra had to determine the **principle** of the Torah Laws that seemed to apply, and then apply the remedy using the **spirit** of the Law. His conclusion was that the only possible solution for the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of marriages between pagan gentiles and Jews (that God plainly said was a great affront to Him) was to send the foreign wives, along with their children, away. It was similar in principle and effect as to when Abraham had no choice but to send Hagar and her son Ishmael away (Ishmael was, of course, also

Abraham's biological son just as these children that would be sent away were the children of Jewish fathers). Now multiply the pain and suffering of the Hagar situation a thousand-fold in the case of the Judahites. What else is the solution to an unauthorized marriage than to dissolve the union? And yet at the same time the Lord says, "I hate divorce!"

Let's continue with Ezra and follow his dilemma, and ours, to see how he dealt with it.

### **READ EZRA CHAPTER 9: 5 – end**

At the Temple, with people surrounding him, Ezra sat for hours in a state of mourning and grief over what he had learned about the marriages between every strata of Jewish society and foreign pagans. It was as though he was paralyzed with depression and fear, unable to process the calamity. We should first recognize that only a person well versed in God's Word, devoted to obedience to the Lord and His commandments, would even recognize that there was a problem let alone the enormity of it. From an earthly societal, economic viewpoint, there was nothing different on the day the bad news was received than from the day before, or the year before, or the decade before. Goodness: even the Priesthood had supported and indulged in these marriages to foreigners. There was no invading army, pestilence, destructive earthquake or political upheaval that had just happened. To the spiritually uninitiated everything appeared perfectly normal; so why was Ezra rocking the boat? It took Ezra courageously going against the tide of Jewish society, from the lowliest field worker to the highest religious leadership, to make them aware of God's great anger against them. And that the anger would not cease until the situation was resolved.

Ezra had to tell the people something that they did not want, or expect, to hear. They, as do most members of any congregation or community, only want to hear good things from their leaders: I'm OK, you're OK. And in this case: God's OK with you, and you're OK with God. But as with the Prophet Malachi, that wasn't Ezra's message to the people. At the time of the evening sacrifice (which is the same as the afternoon sacrifice), meaning about 3-4 pm, Ezra was finally able to pull himself together. Still wearing his torn garments (a traditional sign of mourning), he fell on his knees and began to pray out loud so that the people could hear him.

Since Ezra was a teacher and also carried the King's authority, the prayer was meant to be both a plea to God and instructional to the people as to the nature and gravity of what they had done. Ezra begins by confessing guilt and NOT separating himself from everyone else even though he wasn't one who had taken a foreign wife (so far as we know). In other words, his prayer was on behalf of the congregation of Judah and Ezra counted himself as among them. Therefore he was guilty by association. And this is such an important principle for us to understand that I want to take just a moment to reiterate it.

God views us and our condition before Him in two fundamental domains: 1) as individuals, and 2) collectively as a part of a congregation, community or nation. As pertains to worshippers of God today, we could say that Salvation is an individual matter, and God's judgment in that regard will be person by person. However we are all also members of congregations, communities and nations and so there is another category of judgment that God renders depending on our membership to a collective. Thus we can be saved and be personally in harmony with God, but we can also be part of a congregation, community or nation that is NOT in harmony with God, and that collective may be judged for punishment or even destruction. And, as a member of that particular collective, we will suffer collateral damage regardless of our spiritual status. While our spiritual lives remain assured by our Salvation, the outcome of our physical lives has much to do with the collectives that we are part of.

Thus each person can have Salvation, based on personal trust in God, without regard to the collective. But once we are saved we need to carefully consider the collectives we are part of because the collective presents a different domain that God judges separately from the domain of individual persons. There are collectives we choose (religions, denominations, individual congregations, even communities), and collectives that we usually don't choose, such as our nation. And the Lord urges us to distance ourselves from collectives of any kind that we know He finds wrong minded, unacceptable or wicked, but we are especially responsible for the ones we choose.

<sup>CJB</sup> **2 Corinthians 6:14** *Do not yoke yourselves together in a team with unbelievers. For how can righteousness and lawlessness be partners? What fellowship does light have with darkness?*

Sometimes we have the freedom to make a change (like from Islam to Christianity, or from one congregation to another, or from one community to another), and other times we don't (it's hard to change families or nations). Thus while as individuals Ezra and many others of the exiles did NOT marry foreign women, and thus did not sin against God in that way, on the other hand they were all members of the collective called Judah and so what befell one befell all should God take punitive action against Judah.

So Ezra acknowledging himself as equally guilty in his prayer was not merely an idealistic and loyal statement of solidarity with his people; it was true and real on the collective level. He **was** equally guilty before God. But he takes it one step farther; the collective guilt even spans generations. The guilt (or better, iniquities) that the members of Judah bear partly comes from all the generations of their ancestors, including their leadership (kings and priests), and it still exists and it still must be accounted for. And it is due to this generational guilt as well as personal guilt that Judah was exiled to Babylon in the first place. While not all scholars might agree with me, I feel comfortable in telling you that the term "iniquity" is probably best understood as the same thing as generational sin. In other words, when we hear the Bible speak of "our sin and iniquity", the term "sin" is referring to the sins we personally commit

while iniquity refers to the sins that built up over time that follows the trail of our ancestral family line and community membership. And that ancestral family line goes all the way back to Adam and Eve for everyone, then and now, so none of us can escape without the blood of Christ to atone for our sins as well as for the iniquities that would otherwise plague us.

Thus Ezra confesses that the exile to Babylon was the result of all these iniquities and that the Lord intentionally caused the Jews to be handed over to enemies to be killed, pillaged, and then removed from the land. But starting in verse 8 Ezra moves from history to the current times when he speaks about the favor of the Persian Kings who succeeded Babylon (a favor that had to be supernaturally caused), and now a divinely provided window of opportunity has been opened just a bit to give the disgraced Jews a means to escape their shame and come back to the Holy Land with a fresh start. But even so only a remnant chose to take advantage. Ezra refers to the fact that although the Jews rebuilt their Temple, reinstated the Priesthood, and have for 80 years been free to return to Judah, still they are entirely under the control of a foreign government. The Jews' king is Artaxerxes, the gentile King of the Persian Empire. Judah is but one of the many provinces of the Persian Empire and so the Jews are citizens of a Persian Empire, not a sovereign Jewish state. So while on the one hand the Persians are allowing Ezra liberty to revive Torah Law among the Jewish people, on the other hand it only goes so far as God's Law doesn't conflict with Persian law and until a Persian king decides enough is enough. Thus this brings us back to the beginning of today's lesson whereby the Genie can't always be put back into the bottle. Yes, Ezra and Judah have great religious freedom, for now; however there are constraints that exist that cannot be exceeded because the reality of their circumstance is powerful and out of their control. Therefore there are, and will be, parts of the Torah Law that Ezra and his cohorts will not be able to reinstitute not because it's technically undoable, but because they are in opposition to Persian law and because the new Persian society will fight against some of these proposed changes hammer and tong. And why are Judah and Ezra in this frustrating position that will not permit absolute purity of obedience to the Torah laws even if they try? Because the personal sins of the Jews as well as the iniquities of their fathers have altered history and the conditions they now live under won't allow for it.

Does God excuse it then? Was it then OK not to do the parts of the Law that the Jews couldn't do because of the circumstances of their exile and now a return to a messed-up society and religion? Hardly. All that happens is that the sins and iniquities will continue to pile up higher and higher because they aren't observing all the law, because they can't, because they caused the conditions for this untenable situation by their sinning, and they can't fix it simply because they changed their minds. Truly the definition of a vicious circle.

And yet, God doesn't want to destroy His people or so completely discourage them that they quit trying to reform and do what is righteous. So, as says verse 8, "In order for God to make things look brighter to us and to revive us a little in our slavery" He arranged for their return to Judah and a measure of religious freedom. That is, in His mercy and grace, the Lord did, and will, help His people, not punish them as much as He should, even showing them favor in

some things. However the slavery (meaning that they remain as subjects of the Persian Empire), will not be lifted. They shall be given comfort IN their slavery; they won't be relieved FROM their slavery (at least not in the near future). So, here comes another God-principle that is so very practical but one which is hard to put into practice.

How often in our distress we pray to the Lord NOT to change us, but to change our circumstances. God, if only I wasn't poor then I could obey you and tithe. So change my circumstances. Lord, if only I wasn't so miserable in my marriage, then I could obey You and serve You as I should. So change my circumstances. Father, if only my business would do better then I wouldn't have to disobey You and cheat on my taxes. So change my circumstances. I'm not telling you that the Lord doesn't sometimes change circumstances. However those circumstances almost never change until we ask the Lord to first change us. Ironically once He changes us, suddenly we see that we aren't a victim of our circumstances, we are simply a victim of our own evil inclinations that believes we've found a loophole in God's commandments and an excuse not to obey because life isn't how we want it. The circumstance fades as the focus of our problems becomes us.

In verse 10, still in prayer, Ezra says that the Jews, as a people, have abandoned God's commandments, of course meaning the Mosaic Covenant, the Law of Moses. So after outlining what Judah and Israel did in the past to merit God's discipline, he expresses the particular unfaithfulness that has Ezra so worried and upset. And he goes on to speak of the Prophets having spoken these laws that have been blatantly violated. What we should understand is that he is not speaking of Prophets giving the Law (because all knew it was Moses), but rather it was about what the Prophets had to say in later times when the people were disobeying. There are no direct Scriptural quotes used here, rather Ezra speaks a summary of what the Prophets warned and instructed against in terms of spirit and application.

We talked last time about how Ezra completely construed his purpose and journey to Judah in the context of a 2<sup>nd</sup> exodus that mimicked the original exodus from Egypt. So he constructed and organized the group he led back to Judah in the same way that the original exodus journey was constructed: with Priests, Levites, and 12 groups of laypeople. And so, using instructions given to the Israelites from the first exodus, Ezra says that the people were told that the reason God was giving them the Land of Canaan for their own, and expelling the current inhabitants, is because the Canaanites' uncleanness defiled the land. It was because of their disgusting practices that filled Canaan with their pagan filth from one end to the other that God wanted them out. THEREFORE.....Israel was certainly not to intermarry with them, whether it was Hebrew sons to pagan women, or Hebrew daughters to pagan men. Even more, they were NOT to make peace treaties with these nations or help them to prosper in any way; God wanted rid of them. And if they did as the Lord commanded through the Prophets, then Israel would live in the land and prosper.

How can one not see what happened to Israel in times past due to their refusal to obey this

explicit direction from the Lord, and not connect it to modern Israel who is currently disobeying the same instruction? Today instead of Israel looking to God's Word, seeing what happened to them in times past, and believing the Lord and expelling Muslims (who by definition worship other gods and therefore have no place on God's kingdom land), Israel works daily to appease and compromise in the name of mercy and peace. They have even given them the holy Temple Mount for their pagan shrine and Mosque. Can we not see the precise parallel of Ezra's prayer in relation to this? Jews try to make good relationships with the Palestinians; Israel makes peace with the Palestinians; Israel wars with the Palestinians and even helps them to rebuild after the destruction. Israel believes that prosperous Palestinians will lead to peaceful Palestinians and so Israel gives this enemy jobs. If Ezra were alive today, Israel would never hear the end of it. And, not surprisingly, Israel pays a dear price for their folly and rebellion.

So, says Ezra in verse 13, now that I've recounted to you the history of Israel's rebellion against God, all the misery and calamity that it has produced; and even after God has relented a little and given the Jews a break, here we go again! And this time the great sin is that the Jews have married and made family of the very same people God said He wanted removed or destroyed because of their disgusting practices. The Jews did precisely the opposite of what they were supposed to do. They were to avoid all relationship with the pagan foreigners of Canaan, and instead the Jews made the closest union humanly and spiritually possible with them: the union of marriage. It simply doesn't get any worse than this. Because this sin is the worst of the worst it gains the epithet of "an abomination". And one more time I'll point out: the religious leadership of the Jews promoted and even joined in these illicit marriages.

Let me confront us now with things we don't want to hear. How might we suppose God looks at gay churches and gay marriage that is not just accepted but promoted by the leadership of several denominations? How might we suppose God looks at those Christian leaders who despise His people, boycott their products, and instead teaches their congregations to stand with Israel's enemies? Let's reduce this a bit further; how might we suppose that God looks at Christian leaders who tell their flocks that His laws and commandments are dead and gone and obedience is a thing of the past? With Christ we can just follow our own hearts and live as we please.

How might God look upon a nation that commits millions of abortions every year, and counts it as a good and virtuous thing? How might God look upon a nation that says homosexuality and transgender is not only normal but a thing to be desired and admired? How might God look upon a nation whose leaders find Israel repulsive but the terrorists who attack them justified? Or a nation who refuses prayer in our schools, removes the 10 Commandments from our courts, and won't even allow a Nativity scene, a cross, or a Star of David in a public park?

Bottom line: be careful about the leadership and the collectives you choose to put yourself under, because God holds you responsible for your choices. It doesn't matter whether that



choice begins with your circle of friends, or family, or congregation, or community you choose to live in, or the nation you find yourself in.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Luke 14:26** *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and his sisters, yes, and his own life besides, he cannot be my talmid.*

So as Ezra concludes his prayer he rhetorically asks that since they have done all these things, knowing they shouldn't; knowing what God did long ago and in the not so recent past to punish His people severely for their disobedience. And if despite all this Yehoveh has shown a little bit of mercy and grace so that at least there would be a surviving remnant and an opportunity for that remnant to return, repent, and reform, doesn't it follow that further rebellion will lead to God completely destroying even the remnant?

Apparently, not yet. For these illicit marriages among the returned exiles have gone on for a long time, and they are still alive! But just because the Lord hasn't killed them doesn't mean that they're not guilty. They are guilty and they have pretty much nothing to lean on to beseech the Lord for another chance. The people have been forewarned and prepared that something awful is about to happen, soon, because this situation of the illicit marriage unions cannot stand.

Next week, we'll begin chapter 10 and watch as Ezra decides that the only possible solution is to dissolve that which God finds abhorrent before Him, no matter the societal disruption, the immense and long term heartache, and in a certain sense the unfairness of it to many who are innocent products of these illicit unions.