

## EZRA

### Lesson 20, Chapter 10 Continued

As we near the end of our study of Ezra, we've got some loose ends to tie up. I'll incorporate some thoughts today that perhaps haven't been as self-evident as some of the other ones that have surfaced. So let's begin our continuation of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezra by re-reading verses 1 – 4.

#### RE-READ EZRA CHAPTER 10:1 – 4

This entire chapter is devoted to one matter: dealing with mixed marriages. But just because it is one issue doesn't mean that it is simple or straightforward. It seems that Jewish men and women living in Judah have married foreign men and women and God finds this an abomination before Him that must be remedied. But make no mistake: while it was that some Jewish women married foreign men, the vast bulk of the trespassers were Jewish men who had married foreign women. In fact, in the book of Malachi we learn that some Jewish men went so far as to divorce their Jewish wives in order to marry these *nokri isshah*. That Hebrew term indicates women of another people, who were not part of Israel and essentially had no interest in being part of Israel. But most importantly, it meant that these women worshipped other gods.

#### Malachi 2:11-16 CJB

<sup>11</sup> *Y'hudah has broken faith; an abomination has been committed in Isra'el and Yerushalayim. For Y'hudah has profaned the sanctuary of ADONAI, which he loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god.*

<sup>12</sup> *If a man does this and presents an offering to ADONAI-Tzva'ot, may ADONAI cut him off from the tents of Ya'akov, whether initiator or follower.*

<sup>13</sup> *Here is something else you do: you cover ADONAI's altar with tears, with weeping*

*and with sighing, because he no longer looks at the offering or receives your gift with favor.*

*<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, you ask, "Why is this?" Because ADONAI is witness between you and the wife of your youth that you have broken faith with her, though she is your companion, your wife by covenant.*

*<sup>15</sup> And hasn't he made [them] one [flesh] in order to have spiritual blood-relatives? For what the one [flesh] seeks is a seed from God. Therefore, take heed to your spirit, and don't break faith with the wife of your youth.*

*<sup>16</sup> "For I hate divorce," says ADONAI.....*

Malachi 2 works in conjunction with Ezra 10 so we need to look closely at what is being communicated in these passages. It is that a few different conditions are being described here. First, marriage between a Jewish man and a foreign woman who worships another god. Second, a breaking of faith between a Jewish man and the Jewish wife of his youth. And third, divorce, in general.

What we learned in our last lesson was that in Ezra 10 the Hebrew word chosen to describe the union between these Jewish men and foreign women isn't one of the standard ones used for legitimate marriage; rather it is **yashav** and it means to "cause to dwell". In Proverbs this word is often used in reference to a relationship with a harlot. Further, when the subject of "divorcing" these foreign women is suggested, the standard Hebrew words for divorce aren't used; instead it is the word **yatsah**, which means "to send away". It is a word that can apply to a rebellious son that you kick out of the house, or even a slave that you want rid of. So while in its broadest sense **yatsah** speaks of a divorce as meaning the termination of a relationship, what is being described doesn't seem to be divorce in the most common way we picture it.

Thus between the Prophet Malachi and the Torah Teacher Ezra we get the picture that some married Jewish men (returned exiles) brought a foreign woman into his home and had relations with her, thus breaking faith with his Jewish wife; and apparently he kept them both. True marriage to this foreign woman never occurred in this case; she was closer to a mistress. However some married Jewish men legally divorced their Jewish wife in order to marry the new foreign woman. And in yet another case a single Jewish male would chose to marry a foreign woman over a Jewish woman. So all of these situations are being contemplated.

And then even though in Malachi God states that He hates divorce, the solution to these illicit marriages that is proposed by a Jewish leader named **Sh'khanyah**, and then ordered by Ezra,

is divorce. Or better, a dissolution of a relationship or union that God never authorized. What's the difference between true divorce and dissolution of an unauthorized union? Simple, really. In God's eyes an authorized marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman, with Yehoveh as the guarantor of the covenant. A covenant by definition involves a vow of faithfulness to the covenant terms by those making the covenant; and a vow by definition invokes the name of the God who shall be that guarantor. Unless those two elements are both present, technically there is no covenant even if the parties involved insist there is. So if the Jewish man worships the God of Israel and his foreign fiancée worships a different god, then there can be no common guarantor god and therefore no legitimate covenant can be made. In the end, there is no legitimate marriage. And if there is no legitimate marriage, then when the couple splits up there is no divorce; rather it is but the end of a relationship that never should have existed in the first place.

Now before someone listening here thinks Ezra has just presented them with a loophole in God's marriage laws to dump their current spouse for somebody else, let's take another look at a section of the NT that we examined last week. This passage is from the Apostle Paul, and as is often the case with Paul it can be challenging to try to decipher exactly what it is he's instructing; and not understanding the Jewish culture of his day, and taking what he says in that context, makes it all the more difficult.

### **1Corinthians 7:10-16 CJB**

***<sup>10</sup> To those who are married I have a command, and it is not from me but from the Lord: a woman is not to separate herself from her husband***

***<sup>11</sup> But if she does separate herself, she is to remain single or be reconciled with her husband. Also, a husband is not to leave his wife.***

***<sup>12</sup> To the rest I say- I, not the Lord: if any brother has a wife who is not a believer, and she is satisfied to go on living with him, he should not leave her.***

***<sup>13</sup> Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband who is satisfied to go on living with her, she is not to leave him.***

***<sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband has been set aside for God by the wife, and the unbelieving wife has been set aside for God by the brother- otherwise your children would be "unclean," but as it is, they are set aside for God.***

**<sup>15</sup> But if the unbelieving spouse separates himself, let him be separated. In circumstances like these, the brother or sister is not enslaved- God has called you to a life of peace.**

**<sup>16</sup> For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?**

There are several instructions for different marriage issues addressed in this NT passage, but for our purpose we'll focus on the one concerning a Believer married to a non-Believer because not only does that seem closest to what we're dealing with in Ezra, it is one that a large number of present-day Christians contend with. And one of the most common messages that we'll hear from preachers and Bible teachers is that here we see how the coming of Christ changed things, because while the OT Torah observant Ezra says to dissolve the marriages between Believer and non-Believer, the NT Paul says not to. I'm going to blow some holes in that thinking.

Here's the thing: the circumstance that Paul is contemplating is NOT of an un-married Believer going out and marrying a non-Believer and then regretting it so now he or she wants a divorce. Rather it is that 2 non-Believers get married and later only one of them becomes a Believer. But, let's define some terms. When dealing with gentiles a Believer is defined as a person who accepts Christ and a non-Believer is essentially either a pagan or an atheist (although there was no such thing as an atheist in Bible times). However in the case of Jews, both parties already believe in the God of Israel. So a Believer means one who accepts Christ, and the other doesn't but does believe in Israel's God.

So Paul is NOT thinking about a Believer in Christ falling in love with and marrying a pagan. Remember: Biblically and spiritually speaking true marriage is based on a covenant, and a covenant must be ratified with a vow, and the vow must ALWAYS invoke the name of the covenant makers' god. Just because in modern times secular governments have intruded into the arena of marriage and declares that they shall determine if a union is judicially legitimate, that is an entirely separate issue from how God judges it. Originally marriage was a purely religious matter; it's only in modern times that it has become taken over by secular governments and that is only because of the complex civil and financial issues involved in modern societies. So even though a marriage between a Believer and non-Believer is seen by the government as legitimate, the Believing partner has still broken God's commandment to not be unequally yoked and one has to question if a covenant with God as guarantor has been created at all. So especially from the zealous early Believers' standpoint (in Paul's day), the idea that a Believer in Christ would go out and intentionally marry a non-Believer was unthinkable.

Therefore we need to recognize that what Paul is dealing with in 1Corinthians 7 is NOT the

same thing that Ezra is dealing with in Ezra 10. Rather, Paul is dealing with married couples who, if Jewish, both believe in the God of Israel; or if gentiles, were pagans, but at some point in their marriage one comes to accept Yeshua as their Messiah but the other doesn't. And Paul says that the new follower of Yeshua (male or female) may not, on account of their new acceptance of the Messiah, leave or divorce their spouse who isn't a follower of Yeshua. However, if the one who DOES NOT believe in Messiah Yeshua wants to leave the Believing one, then the Believer is to let them go because it is better to have peace.

So the situation in Ezra is about a Jewish follower of the God of Israel knowingly and intentionally marrying a foreigner who follows a different god altogether; it's not about 2 married Jews or gentiles disagreeing on who the Messiah is (which is the Apostle Paul's issue). And so as to not leave any confusion, I'll use modern terms for Paul's instruction as it would apply to us today. If 2 people get married, and neither are Christians, and then later one becomes a Christian, the Christian may not leave or divorce the non-Christian because as a result the marriage gets very difficult (except for the cause of marital unfaithfulness, generally meaning adultery). However if the non-Christian wants to leave or get a divorce, then they should do so and the Christian shouldn't try to prevent it.

At this point I can't resist taking a momentary detour to share with you something that I wish I had understood when I was younger and much earlier in my walk with Christ, and it involves what Theologians call levels of inspiration. That is, most Christian Theologians acknowledge that not everything said in the Bible is to be taken as equally inspired or uniformly authoritative; who says it matters a great deal. An easy example is that we have wicked people like King Saul whose words we certainly would not take on the same level of divine truth and authority as an oracle of God as delivered by the Prophet Isaiah. Let me show you what I mean in the context of what we've just been dealing with.

Notice that Paul divides his instructions regarding marriage and divorce in 1Corinthians 7 into two groups. Group one is verses 10 and 11, and in them Paul says that this is from God; it is the Lord's commandment that he is speaking. But in group two, which is from verses 12 onward, he expressly says that what comes next is NOT from the Lord but rather it is from himself; it is what he personally thinks about the subject. Paul is defining two levels of inspiration and authority and setting a boundary between them. Think on that for a moment, because when we study Paul's letters we find that he doesn't usually claim that what he is telling us is "from the Lord". Rather it is but Paul telling us his mind and so he is issuing instructions to Believers on a number of important subjects based on that.

In no way am I implying that the writings of Paul aren't inspired of God; they most certainly are. But even he is careful to make a distinction between what his insightful thoughts might be versus what the Lord Himself says (two different levels of inspiration and authority). And this is something that we need always to consider when dealing with what regular human beings in the Bible such as John, Paul, Peter, Jude, James and others say, versus the direct quotes and

instructions of Christ and of His Father, YHWH. Again; what we are encountering is two distinct **levels** of inspiration and authority. God's, Christ's, is obviously a higher level of inspiration and authority than Paul's, Peter's, Ezra's, King David's, Samuel's, or any utterance of a typical human being. Thus, for instance, as we study God's Word if we were to ever find a directive of Yehoveh or of Yeshua that seems to be in conflict with what any human Biblical character or writer might say is truth, then without doubt we must accept the higher authority of the utterance of the divine God over the merely inspired utterance of a human being. Or, as I think is more often the case, we must take what the human being says within the confines and context of what God says is truth, and not the other way around. Reading and interpreting the Bible any other way is what creates erroneous doctrines, misguided traditions, and confusion.

So with that understanding, now it is clear that what Ezra is about to order in the dissolution of unions between the returned Jewish exiles and foreign pagans is not at all in conflict with what Paul says about marriage and divorce. And neither of them is in conflict with God's laws and commandments on the subject.

Let's read a little more in Ezra chapter 10.

### RE-READ EZRA CHAPTER 10:5 - 17

The final recorded words of **Sh'khanyah** in verse 4 were directed to Ezra. He encouraged Ezra to stand up, be courageous, and do his job as their leader. **Sh'khanyah** proposed that all the people make a covenant to send away the foreign females that the Jewish men had brought into their homes and (at least in their eyes) had married. But it was Ezra who had been given authority by King Artaxerxes to be in charge of every matter concerning the Jews, and that included being in charge of the Priesthood.

So Ezra stepped forward and struck while the iron was hot. He demanded that all the people immediately swear to do what **Sh'khanyah** has just proposed; 3 different groups swore an oath to execute what now changed from a suggestion to command. The Priesthood, the Levites and the Jewish laypeople, meaning every layer and level of Jewish society, vowed to send away the foreign women in their families.

Ezra then left the public area and went to what probably was a side chamber to the Temple; there he continued mourning and he fasted as well. Although no prayer is specifically mentioned, it is unimaginable that he didn't pray profusely. This mention of fasting and mourning assures us that Ezra wasn't merely putting on a public display for effect, and then once leaving the "stage" was self-satisfied with the results and so resumed normal life in private. This man was deeply moved and devastated by Judah's condition before God in their horrendous sin of mixed marriages and saw himself as equally liable. What a great example of



Godliness and righteousness is this man, and his words and actions deserve our attention. Did he do everything perfectly? No; but like David, his heart was towards God always. However Ezra, unlike David, was a diplomat and showed great wisdom by being patient and allowing an established and known leader of the laypeople of Judah to come to the conclusion that dissolution of these mixed marriages, as painful as it would be, was the only suitable course of action. Once that lay leader convinced the people of its necessity, then Ezra merely led a religious ceremony to formalize the agreement with a congregation-wide vow.

Ezra seems to have remained in the background for awhile in this matter, only naming some officials to oversee it. So in verse 8 it is said that a proclamation was sent out for all members of the Jewish community to come to Jerusalem to resolve the issue of mixed marriages. The people had to appear within 3 days, so Ezra was not about to let this matter sit and get stale. Judah wasn't that large, geographically, at this time so getting the word out and getting there within that short time span wasn't impossible. But it certainly gave it the aura of urgency and no doubt that was the intention. Plus, a goodly portion of the Jews lived in or immediately near Jerusalem.

It is interesting that it is said that the officials and leaders issued the proclamation. This fits well with how Ezra had chosen to handle this matter. That is, rather than he appearing as a dictatorial force, it is that the people's own community leaders had fully bought-in and this carried great weight. There was a serious consequence for refusing to show up; one would lose all they owned and be banished from the Jewish community. It is instructional to note that where the CJB and most other English translations use the word "forfeit" to indicate the loss of personal property to be suffered for disobedience to the summons, in Hebrew the word is **herem**. If you'll think back to earlier lessons you might recall that **herem** is the centerpiece of Holy War, and it involves the inevitable spoils of war (assuming victory, of course). A closer English translation than forfeit is "ban". And the idea of a "ban" is that the spoils of war are removed from the possession of humans and given instead to God. Generally in Holy War that meant destroying and/or burning the spoils, somewhat like an offering on the altar (however it certainly was not a sacrifice).

By Ezra's time in history the term **herem** had taken on a slightly different twist. It still carried a "holy" tag upon it, and it still involved confiscating items from the private sector of society. However instead of being burned up, these items were given to the Temple, effectively meaning to the Priesthood. So what is being communicated by saying anyone who doesn't come to the meeting will have their property forfeited is that their property will be taken and given to the Temple authorities. This really shouldn't sound strange to us. In the secular world if a person doesn't pay their property taxes, or uses a car in a crime, those items can be legally forfeited and confiscated. But to whom are they given? Usually to the government authority who has jurisdiction, and they can dispose of them or use them as they see fit. Same idea here in Ezra.

But the more fearful threat was being banned from the community of exiles. That means that they would have had to leave Judah, or at the least move to a foreign majority and controlled village. And in those days you didn't just back up the moving van and go. This was a life altering experience.

Therefore all the men of Judah and Benjamin, we're told, assembled on the day of assembly as ordered. A couple of important points. The word all is in Hebrew ***kol***. ***Kol***, while indeed meaning all or every, is a general rather than a precise term and by no means is it intended to indicate 100.00%. So when we encounter the term all (***kol***) in the Bible, understand that it does NOT mean "without exception". It can mean "vast majority", it can mean "nearly all", and only in rare cases (and only if the context makes it unmistakable) it can mean "100%".

In our case, 100% of the men of Judah and Benjamin did not come to Jerusalem, but the attendance was near unanimous.

The second issue is when the verse speaks of the men of Judah and Benjamin. This is NOT speaking of tribes; it is speaking of territory, districts. Under Babylon and now Persia, there was no province or district of Benjamin; but only of Judah. However the Jews were of course aware of territory that had been historically given to Benjamin as apart from Judah. Thus Jews could speak to one another about the territory of Benjamin and understand among themselves what was intended. And we are specifically told that the day of reckoning was the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month.

The 9<sup>th</sup> month is Kislev, which roughly corresponds to December on modern calendars. It was winter, so it was cold and rainy. And I can tell you from the extensive time that I've spent in Jerusalem in the winter time, that it can be a very damp bone-chilling cold. Remember, Jerusalem is at about 2500 feet of elevation, so it snows nearly every year. A couple of years ago the snow was so heavy and deep that it brought this city of nearly three-quarters of a million to halt. Businesses and attractions were closed; roadways impassible, people were in physical danger because only some homes even have heat. And when it rains in the winter, it is a cold rain, and it can be a torrent. So all these thousands of Jews meeting in Jerusalem, outside with no shelter in winter were doing so at the worst possible time of year. Somehow I think that this is exactly what God intended to make the most impact.

Thus verse 9 says there were trembling out in the cold rain, and also trembling because of this matter of the mixed marriages. In other words they were trembling on account of earthly physical phenomena (rain) that affected their goose-bumped flesh, and they were trembling in their guilty souls (they were in fear) at the consequences that were about to happen as a result of their terrible sin against God of mixed marriages with heathens.



At the appointed moment, Ezra appears and addresses the gathering. I can hear the silence as he rises. The Jews, huddled in a huge shivering mass of humanity, standing under the dark skies, soaked and cold, straining to hear Ezra as he reminds them why they are here. Somehow the setting is perfect in all its dreariness and misery for what is taking place. This is not a pep talk. Ezra is not telling the people what they want to hear; he is not speaking of God's love towards them or that God has changed His mind. He is heaping shame upon them, reminding them of their guilt and the grave consequences of their evil intents and their wicked actions. No doubt if this took place in a Church today, that Pastor would quickly have no congregation because most modern Christians have no interest in a fiery speech of hellfire and damnation, let alone one that meddles in one's personal life. We want a light hearted comedy routine telling us that we're OK before God. We don't want to hear about our sin and guilt before the Lord; nor that there is an unyielding standard that we are expected to adhere to. We only want to hear about God's mercy and grace. Who wants a God who would punish us for our trespasses against Him? We want a buddy or a kindly grandfather for a God who looks the other way and tells us not to worry; He understands.

I have news for you; the Jews standing in the Temple courtyard before Ezra weren't that different from you and me. This was a day that they and their children would remember forever, and not with fondness I might add. They didn't come because they wanted to be there; they came because they were ordered to be there, backed up with a threat that if they didn't show up, they'd lose everything they possessed with excommunication to follow. They weren't given a choice of venues or messages.

In verse 10 Ezra says that by marrying foreign women (again, this is about worshipping false gods, not about race or ethnicity); Israel's guilt has been increased. Note that it is not that Israel went from not-guilty to guilty because of the mixed marriages. Rather they were already guilty; it's only that this particular trespass was the straw that broke the camel's back because in God's eyes it was the worst of the worst. Why? Because this sin was directed at Him. Did these mixed marriages cause direct harm to those engaged in it? Not usually. But it did cause harm towards God in that it represented fundamental unfaithfulness between the Jews and Him. The Jews' spiritual husband was the Lord, and they had committed adultery against their spiritual husband with people who gave their allegiance to other gods. The Bible calls this high handed sin.

Ezra demanded that the people make confession, in public. And then, equally publically, make a change; 1) stop associating with the peoples of the land (meaning the foreigners who had moved in to Judah and were worshipping false gods), and 2) send away these foreign marriage partners. Wow, does this ever go against the grain of modern Believers. Too often we will only go so far as confessing our sins to God but only in private. Occasionally we might do it in public, but only in the sense of saying something general and obscure like, "forgive me for my sins".

But the larger point I'd like to make is that it is the second part of this process that is usually left out in our time: real, physical, tangible change. And in some cases it can involve a very painful action. Ezra didn't just ask for confession; that was pretty easy. Simply feeling bad and regretting our sins is nice, but that's only part of what God requires of us for a renewed harmony with Him. Our confession must be accompanied with repentance, which must result in action. This action often results in having to right a wrong, not to just vow "not do it again". God didn't only require the Jews to stop marrying foreign women from now on; they had to face the horrendous choice of ending those relationships that had already been established or remaining separated from God if they didn't. Understand that some of those marriages were decades old; some produced children and then grandchildren. Probably many, if not most, were happily married and they loved each other. They had found a way to accommodate and tolerate each other's gods.

Feeling guilty wasn't good enough. Praying and confessing their wrong wasn't good enough. Promising the Lord, sincerely, never to do it again wasn't good enough. The only acceptable solution was to dissolve those families and send those foreign wives, mothers, grandmothers, and the children and grandchildren produced by them, away. What a horror. How unfair to those who were innocently affected. But, there we have in a nutshell the disastrous nature of sin, and the unintended consequences of our sinful actions. The guilty and the innocent get hurt.

We'll try to finish up the Book of Ezra next week.