

EZRA

Lesson 21, Chapter 10 Conclusion END

This lesson will end the Book of Ezra. Has it not been eye-opening how much of what Ezra experienced and his goal of reforming the seriously degraded Hebrew religion in his day is so similar to the state of 21st century Judeo-Christianity?

The crux of the disease that affected and debilitated the Jewish religion of 450 B.C. is the same as what harms our Christian and Jewish faiths today: adultery. On the surface that may sound like a shocking or unwarranted statement; but the issue of illicit marriages in the Book of Ezra teaches us that any unfaithfulness in our relationship to the Lord, especially bringing in outside influences to add to our religion, or to mix the pagan with the holy, is indeed adultery.

God created the institution of marriage between a man and a woman as a physical earthy type or pattern of the spiritual relationship the Lord wants with His worshippers; thus marriage metaphors are used at times in the Bible when describing the ideal relationship between God and human beings. God is depicted as the husband, and the body of Believers as His bride. Thus for Believers to seek after, or accept, or even tolerate another god in our lives is to be as the betrothed who has become unfaithful to her bridegroom. For a Believer to come into marriage and/or sexual union with someone who worships other gods (or in our era, no god at all) is compared to one who is seeking after a different husband or lover. It is a violation of the 7th Commandment that prohibits adultery. Thus the central storyline of Ezra chapters 9 and 10 explains the problem that many Jewish men had married foreign pagan woman, who by definition worshipped another god; this is defined as unfaithfulness to Yehoveh. By the men of Israel joining themselves to these foreign women, they were being unfaithful to the God of Israel, which according to God is adultery.

Let's re-read a few verses of chapter 10 to get started today.

RE-READ EZRA CHAPTER 10:9 – 17

So here on a cold, rainy day in winter, the 20th day of the 9th month of the year, the Jewish people living in Judah who had been summoned to the Temple arrived and waited to hear their fate from Ezra. Several days earlier a lay-leader of Judah, **Sh'khanyah**, had courageously stood in front of a large crowd that had gathered because of Ezra's loud wailing and very public mourning in a Temple courtyard and told them a truth they didn't want to hear. It was that many of the Jews had behaved in a treacherous way towards Yehoveh in their unlawful marrying of foreign women (pagans). And he told the crowd that he felt that the only thing they could do now was, as a group, to make a commitment to send these foreign wives away; they and any children they might have bore. The people voiced approval, and then Ezra stood up and made them swear a vow to God that they would act on their agreement.

Since the crowd at the Temple consisted only of passers-by and not of the bulk of the returned Jewish exiles, a message was sent out under Ezra's authority demanding that all returned exiles (guilty of this offense or not) were to show up at the Temple in a few days. The penalty for not coming would be forfeiture of all property to the Temple authorities and then excommunication from the Jewish community. For a Jew this is about the nearest thing to a death sentence there was without losing one's life. And now as we pick up today, the people have arrived, as ordered, and they are ready to carry out what they vowed.

Ezra reminds them of their treachery and that the guilty should confess their sin to the Lord, and then do what would please God, which is first to separate themselves from the peoples (peoples, plural) of the land (meaning foreigners living in Judah), and also from their foreign wives. So as it is usually described, Ezra ordered mass divorce in God's name, for the guilty parties. As you might imagine, this has deeply bothered Christian commentators for centuries. Let's investigate a couple of aspects of this unsettling situation.

First: as we discussed in an earlier lesson, the words used to describe both the union and now the dissolution of those unions with foreign women are not the typical Hebrew words for marriage and divorce. Instead the word used for the union is **yashav**, which means to "cause to dwell"; and the word used for the dissolution is **yatsah**, which means to "send away". Therefore, I have much doubt that the Lord saw these relationships as actual marriage (even though the couples certainly felt they were married), because a legitimate Hebrew marriage requires a covenant vow by both parties that invokes the name of the God of Israel. Thus if in God's eyes there has never been a true marriage, the destruction of that union is not true divorce.

Second: Most Christian commentators don't seem to recognize this important nuance, so they see this story as an unfortunate, but all too common, situation of Hebrew marriage and divorce (even though this divorce is one that has been forced upon the Jews by Ezra, God's representative). Thus it is typically rationalized in one of two ways; either that this was simply a matter of Biblically-endorsed racism, that although tolerated in ancient times was nonetheless wrong. Or that this is an issue of Ezra ordering that the Jews should take the path of the lesser

of two evils. That is, in this case divorce was seen as the least worst option when compared with continuing on in the status quo by the Jewish men remaining in union with their heathen wives; but either way it was evil.

And while the first accusation of this being a problem of Jews marrying outside of their race is flatly incorrect, the second accusation does have a certain appeal to it. That is, with only two possible options before them the Jews took the one they thought would please God the most (or in the negative, would upset God the least). I disagree with this; this was not an issue of accepting the lesser of two evils, because it wasn't evil to send the pagan women and their children away any more than it was evil when Abraham sent Hagar away with her child. However it was the sad result of sinning and bad judgment and not believing God in the first place.

That these women were put in a bad way, and that many innocent children unfairly became homeless and fatherless by being ripped away from their households in Judah is terrible. That most of these Jewish husbands and fathers loved their wives and children, and some had been happily together many years, and no doubt were devastated to send them away forever, is heart breaking. However it was the illegitimate union that was the sin, not the dissolving of the union, which essentially terminated the sinful act. What a mighty lesson this is for all ages and eras. The effects of our sin can have a long reach and lasting effect that most often is accompanied by unintended consequences. And more often than not our conscious choice to disobey God and to trespass against Him harms others as much or more than ourselves; collateral damage is the norm, even if sometimes we're too self-absorbed in our own misery to notice it. Sometimes even sincerely righting the wrong can be excruciating, as is the case here in Ezra. And another of the lessons we hopefully learn here is that the longer we wait to change our ways by returning to God's ways, and to start undoing the mistakes that we've made (at least the ones that can be undone), the harder it is and the more devastating the aftereffects.

But there is yet another lesson and God-principle at play here: the principle of dividing, electing, and separating. Although many here have studied the Book of Genesis with me, I would like to briefly review this principle that is really so fundamental to everything God does, and the way He behaves, that I call it a governing dynamic; like gravity and the Laws of Thermodynamics are the governing dynamics that describes the behavior of our physical Universe. So here in a nutshell is God's prime governing dynamic: The Lord achieves His will by dividing, electing, and separating. In the beginning He divided light from darkness, elected light as good, and then separated them. He divided male from female, elected each to a well defined role and function, and then separated them. He divided and separated the land from the seas, and animal life from human life. He divided the worlds' inhabitants into groups, elected each for a purpose, and separated them into nations with boundaries. He divided the twin brothers Jacob and Esau, elected one as the carrier of the Line of Covenant Promise, and the other as one who would oppose it, and then separated them. He took the entire worlds' population of humans and divided us into two categories: gentiles and Hebrews. He elected

the Hebrews to be a people set apart (separated) to serve Him. And since the coming of Messiah Yeshua, He divided the world into those who trust Christ for salvation versus all others who do not, elected the Believers for eternal life, and then spiritually separated us from them and also demanded a certain degree of physical separation. I could go on for several more minutes giving you examples of God dividing, electing and separating.

Naturally our human evil inclinations prodded along by Satan, want to re-unify everything, and dissolve every distinction and division that God ordained. We want to put an end to dividing, electing, and separating because as the world sees it, this is the overriding cause of our endless conflicts and strife. Even the Church has for years cried "unity!" at any cost, declared it a Godly goal, and urged consensus, tolerance and compromise to achieve it. We live in world that sees the concept of nationalism (and therefore national boundaries) as archaic, faulty, and something that needs to be eradicated. The roles and defined behavior of the sexes should no longer have distinction. There is a drive by the political elites and academic intellectuals to unify all people on earth under one currency, one economy, and one government. The so-called Interfaith movement wants us to meld all the world's religions into one that we might have equality and peace.

Unity sounds so good and right, a noble endeavor, from a human philosophical viewpoint; but in fact that is the opposite of God's will and it inherently defies His governing dynamic. Rather He divides, elects, and separates. And thus in the Ezra story of the mixed marriages we have a demonstration of God's will to divide and separate over and against mankind's will to unify. Verse 11 says:

^{CJB} **Ezra 10:11 *Now, therefore, make confession to ADONAI, the God of your ancestors; and do what will please him by separating yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women.***"

Separate YOURSELVES. In other words, God had originally done the work of separating the foreigners (who are not His people) from Israel (who are His people). He had given the foreigners their own separate land, separate governments, and they had created their own separate gods from Israel's God. Long ago the Creator had made distinctions between Israel and all others, but the Jews in our story thought it good in their own eyes to take down those barriers and to end the division and separation (just like the Tower of Babel when Nimrod sought to unify the nations under one language and one king; himself). In our time many Jews no longer want to be the chosen, separated people of God; they want to undo the Hebrew/gentile division that Yehoveh created and become part of one universal people. Why? Because they have decided that the distinction of being elected and separated is not an honor but rather has become too large and difficult of a burden to bear. This philosophy is well represented in Israel's government and has created countless problems for them because they don't appreciate the unique status God has given to them.

In the 21st century (especially in the West) distinctions among people, clearly defined roles of sex and marriage, national boundaries, differences in religions, even the existence of evil versus good, are today counted as bigotry, discrimination, and intolerance; and some recognitions of distinctions and God-defined morality are disparagingly called phobias. Thus in Christianity many mainstream denominations declare that the God of the OT, YHWH who made those distinctions, has been superseded by the God of the NT, Yeshua who has led us to erase those distinctions because they've proved to have been a mistake or were only for a certain people (Israel) or only for a certain time (pre-Christ).

And with that said I can't let it stand without following it up with this: I rebuke that line of thought, and plead with those denominations that have deserted God's laws and commandments to renounce their false doctrines. And I urge those Believers who are members of those congregations to do as God and Ezra commanded: separate yourselves. Do it now before the consequences and collateral damage become unavoidable.

^{CJB} **Revelation 18:4** *Then I heard another voice out of heaven say: "My people, come out of her! so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not be infected by her plagues,*

In the Book of Ezra we discover that many Jews, not only in Judah but also in the Persian Diaspora, decided on their own to take down the barriers, remove the boundaries, and dissolve the distinctions that the Lord had created and nothing could be more emblematic of that rebellious mindset than to take pagan women as marriage partners. But now being confronted by their great sin God says (and I paraphrase) YOU YOURSELVES divide and separate back to where I originally had you. I divided, elected and separated the pagans from the worshippers of Yehoveh; you undid it; and now it's up to you to put it back the way it was.

As I said to begin today's lesson: as with the Jews of the mixed marriages, the Church and Judaism are also deep into adultery. Perhaps not in the sense of husbands and wives cheating on one another; but certainly turning our hearts away from the Lord, our faith institutions preferring our own doctrines and traditions to God's laws and commandments, intertwining secular, foreign, and manmade observances with Yehoveh's Holy Word, and chasing after the gods of this world and all they entice us with. It has become common today for Believers to marry non-Believers as though it doesn't matter as long as we're in love. We have adopted pagan observances and practices and incorporated them into our Church traditions and customs because it's inclusive and fun; while at the same time refusing to acknowledge God's laws and appointed times because we find them irrelevant or old fashioned.

If the reading of the times is correct, the Rapture is coming soon and it is going to be the greatest, most complete and definitive process of division, election and separation there has

ever been in human history. Those whom the Lord deems worthy will enter a permanent new state of being that is incorruptible and righteous; all others will perish in their wickedness (it is as stark as the Great Flood). And yet while it is the Lord alone who will determine that final division, it is us (like it is with the Jews in Ezra) who are called to separate **ourselves** from all that is ungodly, or that pretends to be Godly, and so has no place in the lives of worshippers of the God of Israel and His Son Yeshua. This governing dynamic of dividing, electing and separating that began in Genesis is only completed at the end of Revelation. Then and only then will there be true unity.

In Ezra 10:12, all the Jews who came to the assembly responded to Ezra's demand to do what pleases God by sending away the foreign wives and by separating themselves from the foreign people in the land of Judah by saying: "Yes, our duty is to do as you have said". But in verse 13, some practical realities must be faced. First, there were many people present; all were wet and cold, and needed shelter. But second, to sort out just who had committed this sin and to devise a plan to deal with all the nuances and details involved would take time (a lot more than just a couple of days). Besides, who would make the determinations? What if a Jew had married a foreign woman, but now she declares for the God of Israel and denounces her pagan gods in order to stay? Who determines if she's sincere? What if a foreign woman had brought a dowry of great wealth into the marriage? Or this foreign woman was the daughter of a foreign man who had acquired land in Judah, and now she and her husband were living on that land, figuring it as theirs. Who keeps it? What about the children produced from the marriage? At what age is the cut off point that the child must stay with his or her mother and suffer her fate? What if the "child" produced from this illicit marriage has become an adult and considers him or herself a Jew and has married a Jew? In fact this matter of Jews marrying foreigners has gone on for so long, what is the status of the grandchildren of these illicit marriages?

Bottom line: every case was unique and every case would have to be judged individually. What would be the guidelines? Would there be a court of appeals? No particular person is said to have uttered the suggestion to proceed carefully and thoughtfully, but rather it was a sort of general consensus of the crowd. The solution was that the leaders (no doubt elders) would represent the community and they would set the guidelines. And then appointments would be made for those families who the leaders believed were involved; they were to appear before a council of elders and judges. The nearest city to where a family lived would be where their case was heard and decided. And this would continue until all cases had been examined and resolved.

However not everyone was enthusiastic about this approach. Verse 15 gives us a rather ambiguous statement that a fellow named Jonathan, supported by a couple of Levites named **Meshulam** and **Shabtai**, disagreed with the majority. But disagreed about what exactly? About the forced dissolutions of these unions in general? About who would decide which are legitimate marriages and which are not? About the methodology of decisions being on a case by case basis and so it would take several weeks to get it done? Was it happening too slow or

too fast? We don't know any of this. Nonetheless, the next verse tells us that the former Jewish exiles agreed to the plan and set about carrying it out so the opposition of these 3 men failed. Ezra chose the leaders who would organize the effort and he delegated authority. And the first cases to be reviewed happened 10 days later on the 1st day of the 10th month. It took until the 1st day of the 1st month (3 months) to finish all the cases. So they worked on these cases beginning in winter, and only finished in the spring a few days before Passover.

What follows to the end of the chapter and book are the results. Here's the thing to notice: those on the list of the guilty are of returned exiles. It definitely seems as though this entire exercise has NOT been aimed at the Jewish families who had been left behind after the bulk of the Jews had been carted off to Babylon more than a century earlier. Rather this was almost exclusively about those who had been exiled to Babylon and had returned, beginning with Zerubbabel, and ending with Ezra's group. But we know historically that all the time between those two returns that are spoken of in the Book of Ezra (separated by 80 years), small independent groups of Jews continued returning to Judah in dribbles as well.

Thus we have a mixed bag of Jews who returned from Babylon and Persia with wives they had married during their exile, while others came back to the land from exile and either divorced their Jewish wives once they returned or came back unattached (perhaps as children) and then married a foreign woman while they were living in Judah. Why those left behind didn't seem to be as important in the process I don't know, but no doubt some of them were affected as well.

But what we do know for certain from the listing of names is that even the High Priest family married foreign pagan women! Imagine! Then a number of common priest families are called out as guilty. After that some Levites, singers and gatekeepers. And compared to the lists of names given us in Ezra about the priests and Levites who returned, it seems that the mixed marriage debacle involved the majority of them. So what we see is that the highest level of the Jewish religious hierarchy was as guilty of this crime against God as were the laypeople. No wonder Ezra was so dumbfounded and shaken. And to his credit the leadership wasn't given a pass while only the laypeople suffered the consequences (the more usual scenario in both political and religious purges).

It is self-evident that all these religious leaders who had lived in exile for so many years had eventually turned away from the Torah as their holy manual for Godly living, and instead fashioned their own doctrines and traditions that permitted much of what the Lord expressly prohibited. It doesn't take very long, especially when the leadership declares themselves as the authority to define what is right and what is wrong, to fully pervert a religion and a way of life. And once that happens, whatever the new way is, it becomes the accepted norm and the orthodoxy that is to be followed without question. To challenge the orthodoxy, or to explain to the followers and to the leadership that what they are doing is wrong and against God's laws and commandments is of course met with sneers and incredulous retorts that if everyone agrees on it, and everyone is doing it, how can it be that YOU are right and THEY are wrong?

My goodness: if the entire Priesthood, including the incomparable High Priest, marries pagan women and pronounces it as good and rights in God's eyes, how can it be otherwise?

This explains why Ezra, the pious Torah scholar, was by God's providence able to become closely associated with the King of Persia and his royal court whereby he gained their confidence and their support; and then was awarded highest authority over all the Jewish people in the Beyond the River Province that included Judah. And this authority extended from the High Priest to the lowliest Jewish bondservant; because if Ezra didn't have such unquestioned dictatorial authority, there is no way he could have enforced any reform of the Hebrew religion whatsoever. He would have been laughed out of town and considered a trouble-maker and heretic by every level of Jewish society.

Sound familiar? Not much changes over the ages. Here we stand in 2014, a small but energized movement of reform-minded Believers consisting of gentiles and Jews, almost all of us who have come from many years in either synagogues or churches, but at some point realizing that something has gone substantially off-track with our faith institutions; so why doesn't everyone else see it? Foundational premises that we heard from the Bema or the Pulpit, sometimes for decades, simply didn't (and doesn't) match with God's written Word. And when we finally noticed it, thought about it, fretted about it, and prayed about it and eventually became bothered enough to point it out to friends and even to the Pastor or Rabbi, we were told that we weren't qualified to know such things, or to properly interpret the Bible, or that it doesn't matter what the Bible says because this church or synagogue has its own set of faith doctrines and traditions that it was founded upon and is dedicated to. We could take Ezra's story and bring it straight into our contemporary Judeo-Christian religious setting as is and not have to modify a thing.

The ultimate question that the Book of Ezra asks us all to decide is this: which do we desire more? The praise of men or the approval of God? A comfortable manmade faith that has an aura of Godliness, or far less easy Bible-based faith that has been given to us by the Lord? I believe that most who are listening to my voice have already made that decision and that's why you are listening in the first place.

Our struggle is neither new nor unique; we find it all throughout the Old and New Testaments. So as we close out the Book of Ezra, the inescapable question that I believe that the Lord confronts us all with is: will we have the faith, the perseverance, the courage, and the devotion to God's truth as the only **true** religion? Will we stick with it no matter the personal cost or how weary we might get, as did Ezra and other zealous followers of God in all eras?

As Solomon so wisely decided late in his reign:

Ecclesiastes 1:4-9 CJB

⁴ Generations come, generations go, but the earth remains forever.

⁵ The sun rises, the sun sets; then it speeds to its place and rises there.

⁶ The wind blows south, then it turns north; the wind blows all around and keeps returning to its rounds.

⁷ All the rivers flow to the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers flow, there they keep on flowing.

⁸ Everything is wearisome, more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, the ear not filled up with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be, what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.