

## Lesson 28

### Ezra 10:9-11

9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain. 10 And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. 11 Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

In verse 9, all the men from Judah and Benjamin gather in Jerusalem. As for Judah and Benjamin, we saw the same phrase back in 1:5, and it likely refers to a geographical area, although most of the Jews at this time were from those two Southern tribes.

The exiles gathered in the open square in front of the temple. This square could accommodate thousands of people and was probably the only place in the city large enough to hold this gathering. It should be remembered that most of the city still lay in ruins.

The 20th day of the 9th month was in midwinter, and we see in verse 9 that the people were trembling, in part, because of the cold and the rain. In the Hebrew, “the great rain” uses a plural of intensity to tell us that these were heavy, torrential rains. At this time of the year, the temperature could have been in the 40’s, which along with the rain explains the trembling. But verse 9 tells us that they were also trembling because of the matter that was being discussed.

Clearly, they understood the significance of the occasion. Many of their lives were about to be forever changed. Many were going to lose wives and children. Perhaps even many feared for their lives, knowing that Ezra had the authority to put them to death.

“Even the weather seems to cast judgment on the people: as the people wait outside the temple, they are trembling, not just because of the gravity of the matter, but because of the heavy rain. If this is not intended as a direct sign of God’s displeasure, it is at least intended to intensify the seriousness of the situation: the Bible does not tend to report weather conditions idly.”

The bad weather prevented a long speech, so Ezra gives a short and powerful one – and it is amazing how much he manages to say in such a short speech. (Again, we see the focus of Ezra. He was prepared for the occasion.) He says in verse 11: “Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.”

The speech has four key elements. First, Ezra accused the exiles of being unfaithful to the Lord by

marrying foreign women. Second, Ezra explained that their personal sin had communal implications; it added to the guilt of the nation. The entire nation could be exiled as a result of the sins of a few. Third, Ezra called on the people to repent and confess their sin to God. Fourth, Ezra commanded the remnant to do the will of God, namely, to separate from foreigners, especially the foreign wives.

What more needed to be said? They had broken faith with God, and they needed to restore that broken relationship. Either they would do it, or they would not. There was no need for Ezra to repeat the same message 12 different ways in a longer speech.

And what was the key to restoring that broken relationship? Verse 11 tells us – separation. Separation from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives. And that is still God’s message today:

“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” (2 Corinthians 6:17-18)

We cannot be right with God if we refuse to separate ourselves from that which is unclean. That was true then, and that is true now.

Here in Chapter 10 what that meant was that these men had to divorce their unlawful wives. But I thought that God hates divorce? Yes, that is what Malachi 2:16 tells us, but we need to look more closely at that statement in Malachi.

But before we do, let’s ask another question – when was Malachi written? On the handout, you will see that I placed Malachi’s prophecy at 433 BC on the time line, 25 years after Ezra’s return in 458, and 12 years after Nehemiah’s return in 445.

Why 433? Why that year? We should begin by admitting that we don’t know for sure when Malachi was written. It does not contain any internal date markers, so we have to infer the date from the content and message of the book.

When we do that what we discover is that there is, what one commentator called, a “striking parallelism between the state of things indicated in Malachi’s prophecies and that actually existing on Nehemiah’s return from the court of Artaxerxes.” Also, unlike with Haggai and Zechariah, Ezra makes no mention of Malachi. And Malachi makes no mention of the restoration of the temple. Also, Malachi 1:8 refers to the “governor” without mentioning Nehemiah suggests that the book was written around 433 BC, after Nehemiah had returned to Persia and before he came back to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13:6).

If that is the date for Malachi, what does that tell us? One thing it tells us that – even after Ezra and even after Nehemiah – there were still problems in the camp. Malachi speaks to priests who did not fear God or serve the people, and he speaks to a people who were indifferent toward God, who were faithless to God and to each other (especially their wives), and who were profaning the temple and withholding their tithes.

How could this be after the beautiful restoration we saw in the first half of Ezra and after the

cleansing and repentance that we see in the second half of Ezra? How could this be after Nehemiah's arrival? Hadn't all of the problems be solved?

No, they had not been solved. And if the people then or the people today are waiting for a time when all of our problems on this earth will be solved, that day will not come prior to the last day. We will always have problems while on this earth, sometimes from the outside and sadly often from the inside.

What should we do when problems arise? We need to make sure they cause us to move closer to God and not away from God. We need to face problems by renewing our minds and our hearts through a study of the Word and by resolving personally to strengthen our own faith and our own obedience. When we are all doing that we will see a decrease in our problems – and that was the message that Malachi had for the people of his day.

And Malachi had another message for the people – they had to remain pure and true to God because they were part of God's plan to redeem the world – they had a mission! “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.” (Malachi 3:1) We, too, have a mission, and we must never let earthly problems deter us from our heavenly mission.

So, back to our question about Malachi. Why does Ezra tell these men to divorce their unlawful wives when Malachi 2:16 tells us that God hates divorce? Is Ezra telling them to do something that God hates?

If we look at the context of Malachi 2:16, we will find that it fills in an important piece of this puzzle. Let's start reading at verse 11 in Malachi 2:

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” (Mal 2:11). Yes, God hates divorce, but Malachi is calling on these men to divorce their current foreign wives and 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 likely also tell us something important about the situation here in Ezra 10. It seems that some of these men who were marrying foreign wives were abandoning their Jewish wives to do so. Thus, 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, he was trying to put the homes back together.

Yes, but the second marriages involved children, and they would be hurt by the divorce. And on and on the excuses go. Yes, that is exactly what sin does – it 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 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 grief began as soon as that man departed from God's law of marriage given to all of mankind.

Some commentaries point to another possible reason behind the foreign marriages. They say that the men may have largely outnumbered the women among the returning exiles. And while that is a possibility, that is not an excuse to disobey God's word. As God's children, we have a higher calling. "For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." (Matthew 19:12)

Having just mentioned Matthew 19, we might pause for a moment and 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. That was certainly not Ezra's view!

Anytime the subject of divorce and remarriage comes up, there is an underlying truth that must be considered above all else: God has our eternal destiny in mind, and we should as well. I have personally heard people in unscriptural marriages say, "But God wants me to be happy." Yes, God does want that – but he is seeking your eternal happiness, and so should we all. When we recognize

what is temporary and what is permanent, it makes these issues of divorce and remarriage much easier to solve.

Your relationship with God must come before any human relation. “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)

And one more point on this view. Often we hear that the marriage should continue for the sake of the children. But, just as often, I fear 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 not have been dissolved.

In this case in Ezra 10, some of these men were marrying and then having children with women who practiced child sacrifice! Do you 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 in 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 is not a lack of clarity. The problem is a lack of will to do what God has 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. Even to those in power. What did John the Baptist say to Herod? “It is not lawful for thee to have her.” (Matthew 14:4) John spoke truth to power, and John paid the price. Will we speak truth to power? We have the same opportunity to do so today that John had in Matthew 14.

As his marriage to Ivana Trump, the mother of his first three children, was falling apart because of his affair with Marla Maples, Donald Trump was asked by the New York Post whether he considered adultery to be a sin. “I don’t think it’s a sin,” he said, “but I don’t think it should be done.” My point here is not about politics. I’m not telling you who to vote for. (Domitian? Nero? Caligula? You pick.) But if someone running for this nation’s highest office does not even believe adultery is a sin, that is something the church should care about and be praying about.

### **Ezra 10:12-17**

12 Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do. 13 But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand without,
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neither is this a work of one day or two: for we are many that have transgressed in this thing. 14 Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand, and let all them which have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof, until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us. 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them. 16 And the children of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, with certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their fathers, and all of them by their names, were separated, and sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. 17 And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month.

In verses 12-13, the people agree about what needs to be done, but they have three reasons why it should not be done right now. First, there are too many people here. Second, it is raining. Third, there are too many cases to be decided.

But they also had a proposed solution for those problems, and we see that in verse 14. (This shows that they were not just trying to delay and avoid fixing the problem.) Their proposed solution was for the officials to organize things locally, and then for those affected to come to Jerusalem with their local leaders and judges. They understood that these were very delicate matters, and they wanted things to be handled fairly. Ezra apparently agrees with the proposal because this is what they do in verses 16-17.

But in between verses 12-14 and verses 16-17, we have verse 15: “Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them.” What does that mean? The ESV translation is clearer: “Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.” What we have between the problem in verses 12-14 and the solution in verses 16-17 is the opposition in verse 15! And there will always be a verse 15 between the problem and the solution!

Verse 15 has been called “one of the most difficult verses in the whole book of Ezra.” To what do “this” and “them” refer? The most likely interpretation is that Asahel and Jahzeiah opposed the delay – they wanted to take immediate action. But it also possible that they opposed the drastic measures, perhaps because they themselves had foreign wives. (But if they were opposed to the divorces, one might expect a sharp rebuke from Ezra and the other leaders.)

And what about Meshullam and Shabbethai? Which view did they support? Verse 29 might provide a clue in that Meshullam is listed among the offenders, but that was a very common name – there are perhaps as many as 10 different Meshullam’s in Ezra and Nehemiah! In short, all we can say for sure is that they were opposed to something – which is probably all we need to say.

The process begins on the first day of the tenth month and ends on the first day of the first month – which is about 75 days.

Ezra selected leaders from each family who were responsible for identifying those members of their families who had participated in the sin of intermarriage. The list of these leaders is not provided, a somewhat peculiar oversight in a book noted for its fondness for lists.

These leaders and the guilty parties would travel to Jerusalem to have their situations investigated by the national leadership, which would then offer its decision.

Assuming that the list is complete, a total of 113 Jews had married foreign women. Given that it took 75 days, that they dealt with fewer than two cases a day on average. Why so few? First, they were complicated matters, and the people had been told to come to Jerusalem in an organized manner. Second, some may have been found innocent, which means their cases might not have been listed in verses 18-44. Third, it is possible that not all the cases were listed in verses 18-44, so they may have dealt with many more cases.

Were some of the women allowed to stay? Possibly. Perhaps some of them had or were willing to convert to Judaism. Were some of the children allowed to stay? Possibly. Perhaps some were unwanted by the mothers or would have been in danger had they returned. (Remember these were racially mixed children being returned, in some cases, to a people who practiced child sacrifice.) We aren't told where some were allowed to stay, but we are told that these decisions were made through a slow, deliberative process. This was not a case where the women and children were shown the door and told to leave all at once.

### **Ezra 10:18-43**

18 And among the sons of the priests there were found that had taken strange wives: namely, of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren; Maaseiah, and Eliezer, and Jarib, and Gedaliah. 19 And they gave their hands that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass. 20 And of the sons of Immer; Hanani, and Zebadiah. 21 And of the sons of Harim; Maaseiah, and Elijah, and Shemaiah, and Jehiel, and Uziah. 22 And of the sons of Pashur; Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethaneel, Jozabad, and Elasa. 23 Also of the Levites; Jozabad, and Shimei, and Kelaiah, (the same is Kelita,) Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. 24 Of the singers also; Eliashib: and of the porters; Shallum, and Telem, and Uri. 25 Moreover of Israel: of the sons of Parosh; Ramiah, and Jeziah, and Malchiah, and Miamin, and Eleazar, and Malchijah, and Benaiah. 26 And of the sons of Elam; Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, and Abdi, and Jeremoth, and Eliah. 27 And of the sons of Zattu; Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth, and Zabad, and Aziza. 28 Of the sons also of Bebai; Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. 29 And of the sons of Bani; Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal, and Ramoth. 30 And of the sons of Pahathmoab; Adna, and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezaleel, and Binnui, and Manasseh. 31 And of the sons of Harim; Eliezer, Ishijah, Malchiah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. 33 Of the sons of Hashum; Mattenai, Mattathah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai,

Manasseh, and Shimei. 34 Of the sons of Bani; Maadai, Amram, and Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Chelluh, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasau, 38 And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei, 39 And Shelemiah, and Nathan, and Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azareel, and Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. 43 Of the sons of Nebo; Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jadau, and Joel, Benaiah.

The book of Ezra ends with what has been called a list of shame – a list of those who had married foreign wives in violation of the law. But it may also be a list of the repentant because it seems that many and perhaps most of them sent the foreign wives and children away.

The list begins with a record of the religious leaders who were guilty of intermarriage. The roster includes 17 priests and 10 Levites, together making up almost one-fourth of the total. The priests are listed first, revealing that the sin reached even to the highest ranks of the spiritual leaders. In fact, the family of the high priest Jeshua begins the list. Clearly, there was no attempt by Ezra to suppress the guilt of his fellow priests.

“Where we might have expected some cover-up of priestly guilt, this catalog goes out of its way to give it prominence, with true biblical candor, by reversing the order followed in Chapter 2.”

The priests guilty of the sin of intermarriage made a pledge to put away their wives. The phrase “gave their hands” in verse 19 was a common way of confirming an agreement.

These priests also offered a ram as a guilt offering for their offense. This guilt offering was prescribed even if the offender was unaware of the transgression (Lev 5:14-19; Num 5:8). Ignorance did not equal innocence. (Notice that the ram offering did not mean they could then keep their illegal wife!)

The pledge and the guilt offering in verse 19 are mentioned only for the priests. If they were the only ones who did it, then it may have been because their transgression was worse due to their position. But a more likely explanation is that verse 19 was the example that all the rest also followed, but the description was simply not repeated over and over again in the text for each group.

The temple servants were not mentioned. Perhaps they were too numerous to list, which would also answer our earlier question about the small number of cases. Or perhaps this problem was one that affected only the higher social classes – those with money who could attract the attention of the foreign women.

After listing the priests and the Levites, verse 25 begins the list of those “of Israel.” Sometimes Israel is used in this book to refer to all the people (priests and Levites included), and sometimes (as here) it is used to refer to people other than the priests and the Levites. Four of the families mentioned here do not also occur in the list of earlier returnees found in Ezra 2.

There are no women included in this list. It is possible that no Jewish woman married a foreigner. However, the command of Nehemiah “You shall not give your daughters to their sons” (Neh 13:25) given less than twenty years later indicates that the practice seems to have been at least



known, if not common, in his day. It is more likely no such Jewish women are mentioned because those women had left the group to live with their foreign husbands.

The only significant item of note in this list is the problem of the wording of verse 38. The KJV has “And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei.” The ESV has “Of the sons of Binnui: Shimei,” which comes from a slight adjustment of the vowels. We don’t know for sure which is correct, but the modern view favors the latter.

### **Ezra 10:44**

44 All these had taken strange wives: and some of them had wives by whom they had children.
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Verse 44 is an unusual ending, and there may have been some corruption from the original text. Literally the verse reads: “and there are of them women, and they [masc.] appointed sons.”

The KJV and the ESV both have verse 44 say simply that these men were guilty of the sin in question, and that some of them also had children by the foreign wife.

The RSV goes a step further: “All these had married foreign women, and they put them away with their children.” That is, the RSV translates the verse so that it says these all of these men did what had been proposed back in verse 3. The text is difficult, and we can’t know for sure which is correct.

The ending is definitely abrupt. “The narrator seems to walk off stage with the last of the women and children, leaving the reader contemplating the significance of the final scene.”

But is verse 44 the last word from Ezra? No. He will disappear from the written record for about 13 years, but we see him again in Nehemiah 8 sometime after Nehemiah’s arrival in 445 BC– and we see him, in this same city square, still reading the Law, still doing the Law, and still teaching the Law! If you are looking for an example of faithfulness, godliness, commitment, and integrity, you won’t do much better than Ezra.

But, sadly, Ezra’s reforms here did not last very long. Nehemiah 13:23-28 reveals that the same apostasy was present when Nehemiah returned from his trip to Persia around 430 B.C., roughly 30 years after this time. Malachi would also preach against it, likely about 25 years after this time.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra are a single book, and Nehemiah follows immediately after these events in Ezra 10. But our study must end here in Ezra (at least for now!).

What great themes have we seen in Ezra and Esther? (1) The Law (The Written Word), (2) The Temple (Proper Worship), (3) The Wall (Separation and Purity), (4) Reversal (God’s Plan of Redemption), (5) Restoration, (6) The Remnant, and (7) God’s Providence.

Thanks for reading!

Eric Hall, 2016