

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

EZRA 7-10

God has a big eraser. Though Judah sinned and they were punished, God still allowed them to start over and rebuild. Two biblical books, *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, describe the three waves of Jewish patriots who returned to Jerusalem.

The first return was in **Ezra 1-6**, under **Zerubbabel**, who **rebuilt the Temple**.

Ezra 7-10 recounts the second return under **Ezra**, who **rebuilt the people**.

And the third return is in **Nehemiah**. **Nehemiah... rebuilt the walls**.

Last week we talked about Zerubbabel and the rebuilding of the Temple which ended in chapter 6. Now between Ezra 6 and 7 there's a period of 57 years.

Here's some chronology...

The first wave of Jews returned to Judah with Zerubbabel in 536 BC. They started work on the temple in 535 BC, and it was finished in 515 BC.

For the next six decades very little goes on in Judah. Most Jews are content to remain in Babylon. It's during this time that the story of Esther takes place. In fact, the book of Esther spotlights God protection of the Jews still living in Persia.

In 445 BC, the Persian King Artaxerxes Longimanus will issue a new decree authorizing Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem, and rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

But before walls can be rebuilt, God needs to build up the builders. The people have become lethargic. They've compromised spiritually. They're in need of revival.

That's why 13 years before Nehemiah, God raises up a priest named Ezra to return to Judah, along with others, and lead a revival of purity among the Jews.

Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple - Ezra the people - and Nehemiah the walls.

Chapter 7 **“Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah...”** Ezra's genealogy tracks back 16 generations to the first High Priest, Moses' brother, Aaron. *Some famous priests are in this list...*

Zadok was David's High Priest.

Uzzi was good with an automatic weapon.

Phinehas was Aaron's grandson - the guy who ended the judgment God sent upon Israel. He entered the tent and thrust his javelin through an Israeli and his Midianite girlfriend – as they mocked God's Law in their act of fornication.

Eleazar was Aaron's son and Moses' nephew.

In other words, **Ezra** came from noble stock – a descendent of the High Priest. A zeal for God surged through his veins. Godly passion was part of his heritage.

Verse 6 tells us, **“this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given.”**

Notice Ezra is called **“a skilled scribe”**. When we think of a scribe we envision a monk sitting at a wooden desk, with quill and ink in hand, painstakingly copying an ancient manuscript.

And yes, that was the function of some scribes, but most scribes were communicators. They studied God's Word, and taught it to the people. This was Ezra. He had taught God's Law to the Jews in Babylon.

And Ezra had a vitally important job. Israeli culture was full of Bible references and reflections. You picked up a fear of God and at least a cursory knowledge of His Laws through the culture. But Babylon was a pagan culture. If you were to know God's Word you had to be taught at home and by teachers or scribes.

This is the situation that's developed today in America. There was a day when American culture was based on a biblical worldview and biblical truth. No longer!

Today, we're as pagan as Babylon. This is why Bible teaching is so vital. If you are going to know God's Word you have to be taught at home and at church.

This is why a strategic Jewish institution developed during the Babylonian exile - the **synagogue**. The word means "*assembly or gathering*".

Before the captivity Jews assembled at the Temple - but in Babylon they had no Temple – so they gathered in synagogues to study, and pray, and worship.

When post-exile Jews settled in Galilee they continued to build synagogues. Jesus spent time in the synagogue of Nazareth and of Capernaum.

When the rebuilt Temple of Zerubbabel was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD the Jews were once again scattered

throughout the world without a Temple.

It's the synagogue that's kept Judaism alive over the last 2000 years.

Evidently, Ezra asked King Artaxerxes for permission to return to Jerusalem.

We're told, "The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him." Ezra left for Jerusalem in the year 458 BC.

Verse 7 "Some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim came up to Jerusalem in the 7th year of King Artaxerxes. And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the 5th month..."

He arrived in the summer – late July, early August – in the Hebrew the month of Av - "which was in the 7th year of the king." Tisha B' Av or the 9th of Av was the anniversary of the Temple's destruction. The timing of his arrival was no accident.

"On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him." The 900 mile trip from Persia took Ezra 4 full months.

Verse 10 makes Ezra's mission clear. "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel."

This should be our 3-fold ambition as well... **Study God's Word - Do God's Word - Teach God's Word.** And notice the order – "do" comes before "teach."

Verse 11 “This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of His statutes to Israel...” Ezra was not only a “skillful scribe”, but here he’s called an “expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD...” Wow - an expert in God’s Word. How would you like to be known as a Bible expert?

Let me ask you, **what is your expertise?**

Everybody is an expert in some area of life! It’s where you’ve had the most experience, invested the most time, applied yourself to the greatest degree...

It’s where you’ve invest your intensity, passion, energy, and concentration.

Let me suggest, when it comes to the Bible we all should be an expert. Not just Ezra. Not just the pastor... *“But Sandy, the Bible is a big book. There’s so much to assimilate.”* Hey, you feel about the Bible the way I feel about automotive repair, or cooking cheesecakes, or a stamp collection – it just seems too much to grasp...

But here’s how you master a subject. Recall what’s said of Ezra in 7:10, “(he) prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach...”

Ezra became an expert in the Scripture the way you become an expert in any pursuit – *you prepare* - put your heart into it and put it into your heart. You study, seek, apply, share... *“You can’t master the Bible, unless the Bible masters you.”*

The Bible wasn't given to sit on your shelf, or adorn your coffee table. It's been said, "The best thing to do with the Bible is to *know* it in the head, *stow* it in the heart, *sow* it in the world, and *show* it in the life." Let's all be Bible experts!

It is possible Psalm 119 was Ezra's thoughts on the vitality of God's Word.

Notice too, all three emissaries who lead Jews back to the land are in a sense a picture or type of the Holy Spirit... Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah all carried out the king's orders and worked in the lives of God's people. This is the Spirit's job. He's been sent by King Jesus to rebuilt our lives and He uses God's Word.

Even the names are interesting... "Zerubbabel" means "melted by Babylon" - the Spirit melts our prideful stubbornness and purifies our motivations.

"Ezra" means "Helper" – the Holy Spirit helps us in a million ways.

"Nehemiah" means "Comforter" – Jesus called the Spirit "another Comforter."

Look for the parallels between the ministry of these men and the Holy Spirit.

Verses 12-26 give us the letter that commissioned Ezra. His job was three-fold: **encourage the people - embellish the temple - establish judges in the land.**

"Artaxerxes, king of kings..." Later Nehemiah serves as this man's cupbearer.

It's also interesting that his step-mom was Esther. He certainly had been taught about the one, true God – and was acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures.

“To Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: perfect peace, and so forth. I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go with you.

And whereas you are being sent by the king and his 7 counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand; and whereas you are to carry the silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem; and whereas all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, are to be freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem - now therefore, be careful to buy with this money bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem.

And whatever seems good to you and your brethren to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, do it according to the will of your God. Also the articles that are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. And whatever more may be needed for the house of your God, which you may have occasion to provide, pay for it from the king's treasury.

And I, even I, Artaxerxes the king, do issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the region beyond the River (the Euphrates), that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, may require of you, let it be done diligently..." But notice the king puts a limit on Ezra. As a father said of his daughter, "I put a limit on her spending, and she proceeded to exceed it."

Evidently, Artaxerxes was worried Ezra might end up a free spender.

Here's his limit, "Up to 100 talents of silver (3¾ tons), 100 kors of wheat (600 bushels), 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil (both 600 gallons), and salt without prescribed limit. Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it diligently be done for the house of the God of heaven. For why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?" Artaxerxes feared the Lord.

"Also we inform you that it shall not be lawful to impose tax, tribute, or custom on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God." Ezra is given official Persian permission to impose a Temple tax.

"And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them."

Ezra becomes governor of the Persian province west of the Euphrates.

“Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment.” Ezra was a very powerful man. He had both civil and religious authority. He was a priest and a public officer.

“Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes.” Notice part of Ezra’s job was to *“beautify the house of the LORD”*.

Zerubbabel had his hands full just building the temple. He wasn’t too worried about detail, finish work, trim, gold plating ornamentation... This was Ezra’s job.

Here’s the point, God doesn’t just want a Temple He was a glorious Temple.

And the same is true with His New Testament Temple, the Church.

It’s not just enough for us to come together... He wants our love for one another to be lavish - our works diligent - our spiritual fruit abundant.

He wants us to shine His grace and glory as brightly as possible.

Ezra concludes in verse 28, *“So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me.”*

In the first 20 verses of chapter 8 Ezra lists the families that came with him from Babylon. He mentions a total of 1,496 men - but there were no Levites.

And this was a problem – how do you embellish the Temple with no servants for the Temple. According to the Law only the Levites could serve in the temple.

Ezra sends recruiters to Casiphia – a Levite settlement - and they come back with 38 Levites, and 220 servants. I'm sure the line of reasoning used to recruit the Levites went as follows... *what's a Levite without a Temple? It's like a cook without a kitchen, or a mechanic without a shop, or a chemist without a laboratory...*

Or a Christian without a church... *How can you be a worshipper of God if you never enter God's Temple? Put it another way, how can you be God's child if you never take the time or make the effort to relate to the rest of the family?*

I suppose it's possible, but we'd all agree it can't be healthy.

There is a rabbinical story that claims there were Levites on the caravan, but they were unable to serve. When Nebuchadnezzar brought them to Babylon he demanded they entertain him by playing and singing songs of the Jewish nation.

They refused and bit off their fingertips so they couldn't play for their captors.

Verse 21 **“Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava (Ezra camps at Ahava on his way to Jerusalem), that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him**

the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions...”

For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him."

So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.”

Ezra’s delegation was traveling with a lot of money, and he was worried about being a target. Robbers roamed the roads from Persia to Judah.

Ezra debated on asking the king for a police escort, but he’d already told the king that God would protect them. He didn’t want to undermine his witness.

Hey, Ezra really doesn’t know what to do. So he does what we all should do when we really don’t know what to do...He humbled himself and sought God...

They camped by the Ahava to fast, and pray, and seek God for direction.

When was the last time you stopped – took a break from the hustle and bustle of your life, and camped out just to communicate with God?

Notice, how verse 23 ends. God provided Ezra with a plan.

Verse 24 tells us, “I separated 12 of the leaders of the priests - Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and 10 of their brethren with

them - and weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the articles, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel who were present, had offered. I weighed into their hand 650 talents of silver, silver articles weighing 100 talents, 100 talents of gold, 20 gold basins worth a thousand drachmas, and two vessels of fine polished bronze, precious as gold.” Ezra did what Kathy and I do when we go on vacation. We divide our money in case one of us gets ripped off we’ll still have enough change to get home. Ezra divided the wealth among 12 priests.

“And I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD; the articles are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers.

Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers' houses of Israel in Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD." They’d weigh in when they arrived.

“So the priests and the Levites received the silver and the gold and the articles by weight, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God.”

“Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the 12th day of the 1st month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road.

So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there 3 days.

Now on the 4th day the silver and the gold and the articles were weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui, with the number and weight of everything. All the weight was written down at that time.

The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, and 12 male goats as a sin offering.

All this was a burnt offering to the LORD.

And they delivered the king's orders to the king's satraps and the governors in the region beyond the River. So they gave support to the people and the house of God.”

Chapter 9, “When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying...” Ezra doesn’t have time to get his bags unpacked before there’s a problem.

"The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.” They’ve married idolaters.

“For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass.” The leaders were supposed to be examples – instead they were the chief perpetrators.

And notice how Ezra reacts to their crime. “So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.”

This was a serious offence. It grieved Ezra. He not only rips his clothes – an oriental sign for angst and anguish – but he plucks hair from his head and beard.

When the kids were little I wore a beard. They’d grab it with their tiny hands, and give it a yank. Hey, when a child gets a handful of hair, and pulls with all his might it’s painful. Ezra so agonizes over the sin of the people he yanks his hair.

Understand what these Jews had done... Remember these were the people who had seen their city leveled, their Temple burned, their babies carried off into exile because of the sin of idolatry – but what launched them into that idolatry?

You could trace it all the way back to the sin of Solomon. King Solomon married foreign women – some 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Solomon found that the *marriage altar* led to the *altars of idolatry*. When he embraced these pagan wives they brought their pagan gods into the marriage – and it eventually caused Solomon to compromise his loyalty to the true God.

This is what blew Ezra away – *is history about to repeat itself?*

Are the Jews making the same mistake all over again? Ezra is stunned that the people would even be flirting with the possibility. You'd think marrying unbelievers would be the last sin they would be tempted to commit. *How can this be?*

Notice verse 1 tells us, the people of Israel did “**not separated themselves.**”

Hey, as followers of Jesus, we are called to live lives separate from the world.

This is a vital principle, but it's one that's sometimes misunderstood. Often this is interpreted to mean that as Christians we should separate ourselves from folks spatially or culturally. In the Middle Ages monks literally went into the mountains and deserts to separate themselves from the world – **logistical separation.**

In the church I grew up in we practiced more of a **cultural separation.** We refused to listen to rock music, and wore crew-cuts, and peg-leg pants.

But God's desire for us is **heart separation.** Jesus wants us to live in the world - logistically. Relate to the world - culturally. The separation God expects from us is to reserve our heart – and our mind – and soul - and our strength for Him.

We're not to allow the attractions of this world crowd out Jesus.

The issue for Ezra wasn't interracial marriage. Look at Jesus' genealogy and you'll find Gentiles. Rahab and Ruth both became part of Messiah's lineage.

The concern expressed in verse 2, “**the holy seed is**

intermingled with the peoples of those lands” should be viewed in light of verse 1, “(Israel has) not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites...” He wanted a spiritual separation.

How can you say you love God when you embrace “abominations”?

Today, *holy seed still should not intermingle...* but that means don't become legally entangled with an unbeliever. Be separate from the world – not logistically or culturally - but spiritually. Have distinctive values, and priorities, and loyalties.

Its interesting Ezra's severe grieving is over a sin he didn't committed.

Yet, his prayer in verse 6 is in the first person. It shows how strong Ezra identified with the Jewish people. This is always a mark of a good leader.

Verse 5 “At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. And I said, "O my God: I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.” This was not Ezra's sin, but Judah's sin – yet if Ezra is going to be part of the solution he has to take on the problem.

“Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to

the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day. And now for a little while grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage.

For we were slaves.

Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

And now, O our God, what shall we say after this?

For we have forsaken Your commandments, which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity.

Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your children forever.”

“And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this, should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people committing these abominations?”

Ezra tells the people they've been punished less than their sins deserve.

When people ask me how I'm doing I'll often reply, "A lot better than I deserve." And I mean it. I'm the recipient of bountiful mercies. And I don't want to forget it.

Verse 14 "Would You not be angry with us until you had consumed us, so that there would be no remnant or survivor? O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!" And that's where Ezra's prayer ends – without offering a whole lot of hope for forgiveness.

I'm sure Ezra wanted God to forgive the people – give them *another second chance*. But Ezra also knew there were limits to God's patience. Ezra didn't want to presume on God's grace. He was paralyzed by the sins of the people.

Once again, he had no idea what would happen next...

Verse 1 "Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly."

The people join Ezra in the Temple. They confess their evil in true repentance. Ezra is devastated. If tears could wash away sin, Israel would be forgiven.

But a flood of tears can never cleanse sin. It's up to God to forgive.

Suddenly, in the midst of Ezra's grief a man named Shechaniah steps up and speaks to Ezra. His words are some of the most beautiful in the Bible.

“And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, “We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.”

I love these words - **“yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.”**

Nowhere will you read a more liberating, soothing, merciful, gracious, and far-reaching statement... Israel is not just guilty of sin – but repetitive sin - the same sin a second time. For me, these are the worst moments - when I'm guilty of the same ole sin. I promised God this would never happen again, but it has.

This was a dark day in Israel's history. Yet at the lowest point God let's us know we can't possibly exhaust His boundless grace and mercy.

Even after you think you've *maxed out mercy*, there is still another dose for the heart that's truly repentant. As the people sang earlier in 3:11, **“For (God) is good, for His mercy endures forever...”** Guys, let the truth spoken by Shechaniah speak to you, *“yet now there is hope for you even in spite of what you've done.”*

Shechaniah continues, **“Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my**

master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise, for this matter is your responsibility. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it." God forgave the people, but there was still the matter of the unlawful marriages. Shechaniah suggests that everyone who has married a pagan put away their wives and children.

"Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word."

Ezra agreed with Shechaniah's remedy. "So they swore an oath."

"Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity.

And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem, and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the instructions of the leaders and elders, all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the assembly of those from the captivity." *You better show up!*

"So all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered at Jerusalem within three days. It was the 9th month, on the 20th of the month; and all the people sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of heavy rain." It was the month of December, and a cold rain pelted Jerusalem.

Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel.

Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives."

Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "Yes! As you have said, so we must do. But there are many people; it is the season for heavy rain, and we are not able to stand outside. Nor is this the work of one or two days, for there are many of us who have transgressed in this matter.

Please, let the leaders of our entire assembly stand; and let all those in our cities who have taken pagan wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of their cities, until the fierce wrath of our God is turned away from us in this matter." Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite gave them support."

"Then the descendants of the captivity did so.

And Ezra the priest, with certain heads of the fathers' households, were set apart by the fathers' households, each of them by name; and they sat down on the 1st day of the 10th month to examine the matter. By the 1st day of the 1st month they finished questioning all the men who had taken pagan wives."

It took them 3 months to conduct the interviews.

As they spoke to each family the wife was given the opportunity to renounce her idols and former beliefs and commit her allegiance to the God of Israel.

Only those wives who refused to repent of their sin and idolatry were actually divorced from their husbands and expelled from the covenant community.

“And among the sons of the priests who had taken pagan wives the following were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah. And they gave their promise that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they presented a ram of the flock as their trespass offering.” Even the priests had indulged in this sin.

The remainder of the chapter lists 114 men who ended up having to divorce their wives, and who had children who remained in the custody of the wife.

One author estimates it represented a very small percentage of the people.

But the ethical question remains... Malachi 2:6 assures us that the God of Israel hates divorce. *Was it right for these Jews to divorce their wives?*

Scripture sanctions only three situations where God allows for divorce and remarriage... In Matthew 5 divorce is permissible because of **adultery**.

In 1 Corinthians 7 **abandonment** is a legitimate cause for divorce.

And when a party divorces on unbiblical grounds – **and afterwards realizes their mistake** – and sees that there's no more opportunity to reconcile with their spouse – then their sin is forgiven and God allows them to start over.

But the situation in Ezra's day fits none of those scenarios. It reminds me of the two boll weevils who grew up in South Carolina. One boll weevil went to Hollywood and became a famous actor. The other stayed behind in the cotton fields. His life never amounted to much. And of course, the boll weevil who stayed in South Carolina was always known as *the lesser of two weevils*.

In my opinion, what happens in Ezra 10 is another case of choosing the lesser of two *weevils* – *I mean, evils*. Either option Ezra took would have a downside...

If these marriages remained intact the nation would likely have been lured back into idolatry. Whereas, if they divorce their wives they've committed a sin, and deprived their kids of a father - the choice was *the lesser of two evils*.

Which brings up another question... *isn't this the situation a believer faces when married to an unbeliever?* If the believers could divorce their wives in Ezra 10, why does Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 say that a believer married to an unbeliever should remain married - since he or she might end up converting their spouse?

Here's the difference... the New Testament believer packs a power the Old Testament saint lacked. We have a new nature, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This enables us to be the *influencer*, rather than the *influencee*.

This is why 1 Corinthians 7 holds out high hopes that a believer can positively influence their pagan spouse. The Spirit of God lives within him. Whereas, Ezra knew there was a high probability the Jews in Jerusalem would be negatively influenced by their unbelieving spouses – thus, he condoned the divorce.

To sum it up, [Ezra 10 was a special case - a one-time occurrence in Israel.](#)

Here's the take home lesson... Ezra didn't just cry about sin. He repented.

[True repentance does more than shed tears – it takes action.](#) It does what needs to be done to keep from repeating the offence. Real repentance is the willingness to do whatever it takes to change, and live in God's ways.

Hey, you don't overcome serious sin without getting serious about sin.

Tonight, if you're struggling with a sin, even a repetitive sin, there is hope for you in Christ... confess, repent, and take action to eliminate it from you life...