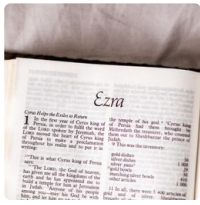


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Ezra 9 - 10



Ezra - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg discusses the issue of intermarriage between the Jewish people and other nations, particularly with regard to their religious beliefs and cultural differences. He notes that while marrying someone from a different race or culture can be challenging, it is important to choose a mate based on a desire to glorify God in marriage. Gregg emphasizes the importance of aligning one's attitudes and behaviors with God's revealed standards, which can lead to repentance and a desire for divine mercy. He shares insights from the book of Ezra, highlighting the example of the Jewish community seeking to separate themselves from pagan influences, and discusses the significance of fasting, prayer, and other spiritual practices in Jewish piety during their exile.

Transcript

We have two chapters left of Ezra, and in the two that we just covered, we had very little information except that Ezra made a journey from Persia to Jerusalem with a lot of stuff, a lot of gold and silver and a letter from Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, telling anybody that Ezra wanted to ask for stuff, that they should give it to him. And giving him, Ezra, the authority to appoint governors throughout the whole province, south and west of the Euphrates. It's a large area, and Ezra was then the most powerful man, probably, with that authorization.

And that means, of course, he'd also be the most powerful man in Jerusalem at that time, which means he could clean house if he saw fit, and he did. Now, his ministry was not free. We don't know how many years it went on, but he was still there some years later, decades later, in the time of Nehemiah.

And so, he must have had an extensive period of reform, and leadership, and teaching in Israel's statutes and judgments. But we have only one instance of his reforming efforts in this book, and that's what occupies these two chapters. It said, in chapter 9 of the book, that Ezra was a verse 1, when these things were done, the leaders came to me saying, 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, and the Egyptians, and the Amorites, for they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is intermingled with the peoples of those lands.

Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass. Now, apparently, it was just a general habit of the Jews who came back from Babylon to marry whoever they wanted to, including pagan women, and they have not only married, but also compromised with the religions of these women, and not just the Jews, but the priests and the Levites. Now, the Levites were permitted to marry outside of their tribe, but the priests were not.

The priests were required to marry persons who were very strictly, you know, racially pure, and so forth, and yet the priests and the Levites and the leaders of the land have been the worst offenders, in this case, of compromise, and it mentions the persons whose abominations and the daughters of whom these people have married and compromised with, and it's the Hittites, the Perizzites, and the Jebusites, who, of course, are Canaanites. These are people that God specifically told Israel not to intermarry with. They were the original inhabitants of the land back in the days of Joshua that had to be annihilated, but were not, but also there's mention of the Ammonites and the Moabites.

These are the nations that lived on the east side of the Jordan River in the region of Gad and Manasseh and Reuben, and they were hereditary enemies of Israel, too. They were not Canaanites, and there was no express forbidding of marrying women from those nations, but of course the religions of those nations were an abomination. They worshipped Chemosh and Molech and these gods that required infant sacrifice, and so marriages to these women and these women being unconverted was just as offensive as marrying Canaanites.

Now, to marry a Canaanite could be done if the Canaanite converted to the worship of Yahweh, so that we see, for example, Rahab, who is a Canaanite, converted to Yahwism and as a result married into the family of Judah and was an ancestress of Jesus himself and of David, and that was apparently okay because she was no longer an adherent to the religion of the Canaanites. This was more of a concern on God's part about inter-religious or interfaith marriage, not interracial marriage. There's actually no evidence that God opposes interracial marriage in the Bible, but he does oppose interfaith marriage, and along with interfaith would faith would be part of culture, too.

I think the biggest problem that people find when they marry a different race is that different races often have different cultures just because they come from different parts of the world and their cultures have developed independently, so that many times people find when they marry interracially that they're really marrying interculturally, and it's the cultural differences more than anything that cause problems, and religion is one of those cultural things. Now, of course, if persons from different races have become

Christians and have adopted sort of a similar Christian culture, it minimizes that problem, but the Jews, in this case, had not even required their pagan wives to be converts, and so they were in violation of God's law, and the worst of it is that they were polluting the holy seed, that is, the pure Jewish faith and bloodline. Now, of course, with the Jews, bloodline and faith were very much intermixed in their mind.

If you're born of Jewish parents, it was assumed that you were of the Jewish faith. You were circumcised by your parents on the eighth day, and that puts you into a covenant relationship with God and obligated you to keep the law of God, so a Jew was essentially, you know, by default was of the faith of Yahweh, unless they did something specifically to renounce that, or one of those things that the law says anyone who does this will be cut off from the people. Those would be things like worshipping idols, committing murder, and some other things like that, very heinous offenses, but for the most part, a Jew by birth was a Jew by religion as well.

That's not true today. There are probably as many atheist Jews today, Jewish by race, but atheist by belief, as there are Jews who are Jewish in their belief. There are a huge number of Jews today who are Buddhists, and there are, of course, Jews of every religion.

It is not a given these days that a person of Jewish ancestry should be or would be of the Jewish faith, but in those days, it was just a given. If you're Jewish by birth, you are required to be Jewish by faith. It was not really a voluntary religion.

You were made Jewish by your parents burying you and circumcising you, and nothing but an absolute treason against your people and against your God could change the fact that you were obligated and supposed to be keeping the laws of Yahweh. Now, Gentiles could come in too, but in most cases, they didn't, and the holy seed of Israel was being polluted by these Gentiles marrying in, and of course, they're having children who are part Jewish and part heathen, and so it would be a mixed race, but more importantly, a mixed faith family, and therefore, the next generation would be half-breed Jew Gentile, and if they married similarly outside the faith, it wouldn't be very long before the Jewish bloodline itself would be completely corrupted and completely disappeared. Now, there are many who would suggest that that has happened in the time since then, and others who argue against that.

There are those who believe that the Jewish race still exists, and there are others who believe that the Jewish race has been so thoroughly compromised by intermarriage that it's impossible to even speak of there being a Jewish race anymore, and it seems to me that the second view is the one that would have the most evidence that I'm aware of in its favor, and also the most reasonableness. That is that the race has been pretty much dissipated. The bloodline has been spread throughout the whole population of the lands where Jews have been living for the past thousands of years.

For 2,000 years, the Jews have lived among the Gentiles and have intermarried with

them, and intermarried for many generations, so that it'd be very unusual to find any particular person whose parents only married other Jewish people over the past 50 generations or more. It could happen, but it'd be unusual, and it'd be almost, I would think, impossible to document in any given case, so it almost does become, you know, impossible to speak with any certainty about any perimeters of a racial group called Jews. People are called Jews today because of retaining the Jewish culture and religion, but more culture, because there are people who call themselves Jews who aren't of the Jewish faith.

They don't believe in God. They're atheists, but they are of Jewish extraction. Now, how pure their bloodline is, no one can say, but the reason they're considered Jewish is because their ancestors have consistently kept the Jewish practices, and they have affirmed Hanukkah as a special day, you know, Passover, and Sabbath, and circumcision, and things like that.

These are, we consider, religious things, but for many Jews, they're just cultural. There are Jews who are atheists who still celebrate Hanukkah every year, just like there are Gentiles who are atheists who celebrate Christmas. It's a cultural thing, not a religious thing.

In any case, this deterioration of the bloodline was beginning to happen immediately after the exiles had come back to Jerusalem. In fact, it happened even before then, because before this time, Esther had delivered her people from the Persian attempt to exterminate them, and we are told in the book of Esther that because of the king's favor toward Esther and toward the Jews, it's as many of the Persians became Jews, and so what that means, of course, is many people who had no Jewish blood at all just converted to Judaism. They became Jews.

Now, obviously, once a Gentile becomes a Jew, they intermix and intermarry with the Jewish community. They maintain Jewish traditions, and so they're called Jews, but they may not have any Jewish blood at all in them. So that Jew today, although there are no doubt, are many Jews, perhaps most, have some remnant of Abraham's blood in them.

It may be very much diluted through the intermarriage through the years, and of course, it wouldn't matter whether that's true or not, because God's not a racist anyway. God doesn't care if you've got Jewish blood or Gentile blood or any other kind of blood. He cares about the blood of Jesus only as that which will identify you as his.

So they were polluting, intermingling the Holy Seed, and that was considered to be a disastrous thing. Indeed, it says, the hand of the leaders and the rulers have been foremost in this trespass. 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.

Now the tearing of one's garments, as we've seen previously, is a cultural sign of grief

and repentance, but especially grief. And the plucking out of one's own hair is not an established sign of repentance or grief in the Scripture, although the shaving of the head is. Sometimes persons would shave their head as a sign of mourning.

Maybe he didn't have a razor handy, so he started tearing his hair out with his hands as a sign of extreme grief. Hard to say. And he sat down astonished.

He was very much affected by what he found when he came back to Jerusalem to see this degree of compromise. Now it is a tremendous degree of compromise, although we might take it in stride because so many Christians or professed Christians in our culture do marry non-Christians. But when you think about it, it is a tremendous betrayal of Christ.

Because presumably you marry somebody with whom you think you have a great deal in common. Would you not? I mean, does anyone marry somebody that they don't think they have a great deal in common with? I mean, you find yourself compatible with someone because you feel like the things most important to you and things most important to them are going to merge well in a life together. And that basically, you know, you're going to have agreement about how you're going to raise your children for the most part and so forth.

Now people often find that it's not so much so after they're married as they thought it would be. But certainly when a person chooses a mate, they are choosing someone on the basis they think, you know, I can get along with this person. This person and I have a lot of important things in common.

We really can merge our lives easily. And that means that if one chooses a non-Christian in whose life Jesus is nothing, then it cannot very well be that the Christian is placing Jesus in the place in his life where he belongs. I remember when I was a teenager and I was first given the assignment of answering questions for new converts in a Christian coffeehouse ministry in 1971.

One of the questions that came up again and again was, is it all right to date non-Christians? I remember thinking, why would you even want to? What would you have in common with them? I couldn't even imagine. Why would somebody want to date a non-Christian if the person in question is a believer? If a person is a Christian, that means Jesus is everything to you. Everything you do, everything you think, every choice you make is based on his Lordship.

You love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and your strength. What could you have in common with someone who doesn't have any love for Jesus at all or any loyalty to Jesus? It's like marrying an alien from another planet. How could you even conceive of finding such a person attractive? I mean, I understand how people could find someone attractive in the carnal sense, but when it comes to marriage,

if you choose to marry somebody who's not a Christian, it means you're saying that all the things that define me most are compatible with the things that define that person most or else we wouldn't merge our lives in that way.

That means I don't consider Jesus to be one of the things that is a primary defining element in my life. It's a betrayal of God. So these Jews were betraying God by worshipping people who worshipped other gods.

You see, your marriage is your most important relationship in your life and obviously when you get married you dream of having oneness with the person that you're going to be with for the rest of your life. And if that person doesn't love God and you want to merge your life with them, you must not love God. I just can't imagine that you could.

I've never been able to understand for a moment how any Christian would even conceive of courting or pursuing a relationship toward marriage with an unbeliever, but I guess I can if the Christian's not much of a Christian. If the Christian doesn't place Jesus in a very significant part of their life, but then I'm not sure they're really a Christian, but someone who claims to be one and doesn't love God enough to want to marry someone who loves God, that person, I really question whether they're born again or they may be backslidden. But in either case, it's a grievous thing.

And in our day we have even another grievous thing and that is that people do marry other Christians and then divorce them. I mean the whole point of marriage is it's to glorify God. Like everything else in a Christian's life, it's to glorify God.

You choose your mate based on your desire to glorify God in marriage. You stay in a marriage because, well I mean maybe because you enjoy it and love your mate, but even if you don't, you stay in the marriage to glorify God. Your whole life is to glorify God.

And people's marriage practices, whether it's marrying the wrong people or divorcing the right people, are probably the most significant indicator of where their heart is with God. Because the most important choices you make in your life are, well, marriage and family choices and those will be reflected by your most important governing values. And so, you know, I don't see, most of my friends don't marry non-Christians, but I'm amazed at how many people I know divorce their Christian spouses.

And this would be the same kind of concern. What it exhibits about people's attitude toward God is that they can get married or get unmarried as they wish, regardless of what God thinks. They can make the most important decisions in their whole life without regard to God.

To think of people in the church doing this just is astonishing. And Ezra sat down astonished. Now he showed these outward signs of grief by tearing his clothing and

plucking out his hair and his beard.

You know, Nehemiah, later on, was also aggrieved by compromises like this in Israel. And he took a little more aggressive approach to it. In Nehemiah 13, in Nehemiah 13, verses 23 through 25, it says, in those days, this is Nehemiah speaking, I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab, and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one of the other people, which is simply an indicator of which culture they were being raised in.

They couldn't even speak Hebrew. They obviously weren't being raised in the Jewish culture or religion. And he says, look, I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair and made them swear by God, saying, you shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons or yourselves.

He cursed them, punched them, and tore out their hair. At least Ezra tore out his own hair. But Ezra thought, I mean, Nehemiah thought, I'll keep mine.

I'll tear theirs out. You know, they're the ones who are offenders, not me. That's a good way to practice church discipline, I think.

Just bring the offender before the elders and have them punch him with their fists and tear out his hair with their fists. That'd be an amazing thing. Now, back to Ezra, verse 4. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me because of the transgressions of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

Now, I mentioned that I think that Ezra was alluding to Isaiah the prophet back in chapter 7, verse 27, when he used the expression to beautify the house of the Lord, which is an expression that comes from Isaiah 16, verse 7. I think Ezra had Isaiah in mind more than once because this expression, those who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, which are repeated in chapter 10, verse 3, this expression, people who trembled at God's word, comes from Isaiah, Isaiah 66, 2. And there God said, to this man will I look, to him who is of a broken and contrite spirit and who trembles at my word, meaning they have the fear of God in them. When they hear the word of God, it grips them deeply and they tremble at the disparity that exists between God's revealed standards and their own and other people's behavior. Such people who tremble at God's word are the people that God honors.

And it's interesting too because in Isaiah 66, where this appears, it's right after verse 1, verses 1 and 2, because it says in verse 1, heaven is my throne, earth is my footstool, what house will you build for me? He says, I've made all those things. He says, but to this man I will look, to him who is of a broken and contrite spirit who trembles at my word. It

was the house of God, the temple.

God says, who cares about that? I care about people trembling at my word. Now Ezra was living at a time where the temple had recently been rebuilt and reinstated and its worship was being practiced. But Ezra noticed more importantly there was a remnant there who trembled at God's word and they were more important to God than of course the house of God itself would be, according to Isaiah.

But it does look like Ezra alludes to Isaiah more than once. Isaiah's prophecy was apparently in his mind along with the law of the Lord. 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, now the rest of this chapter is what he said to God, his prayer.

It's a great prayer. It resembles in some ways Daniel's prayer in Daniel chapter 9 and also Nehemiah's prayer in Nehemiah chapter 1. All three of these men were mighty intercessors for the people of Israel. They were very much gripped by the sins of their nation and the judgments that had come upon them and that they deserved and they prayed and interceded for mercy.

So Daniel, in Daniel chapter 9, Nehemiah in Nehemiah chapter 1 and Ezra here pray very similar prayers, similar in spirit, similar in content. And in all three, the men who are praying identify themselves with their sinful people. They say we have done these evil things, we, we, we, instead of they.

Because of the solidarity they felt in Israel as one nation, one people, they realized that you know the whole nation had suffered because one man, Achan, had taken a gold wedge and a Babylonian garment out of Jericho, yet the whole nation suffered because God treated Israel as one. Actually the church is viewed that way by God too, you know. Although your salvation is an individual matter, the fate of Christians in this world can be dictated by the behavior of a minority or a few or many, but not ourselves.

That is, we may fall under persecution, we may fall under disdain in the world's eyes, not because of things we particularly have done as individuals. In fact, we might not even be personally guilty of those things, but we are one body. And Paul said, when one member suffers, all suffer, and when one is honored, all are honored, all rejoice.

And so Israel too was one body of a sort. And so these men who interceded, they didn't stand above in a self-righteous way and say, well we didn't do these things, but they did. And that would have been true.

These individuals, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, they were not guilty of the things that the nation was guilty of, but they entered into the identity of the people of God as if they were complicit with them, or at least tainted by what the others had done. And so they

confessed the sins of the nation as if they were their own sins. He said, I said, oh 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.

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.

He means since the time of Cyrus, this is about a hundred years time probably, but that's the little time he's talking about compared to the long history they've had of disobedience and shame. It says, 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, a peg meaning something driven in like a peg that couldn't be moved to give us a secure footing in Jerusalem. 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 their abominations, which they have filled it from one end to the other with their impurity. Now therefore do not give your daughters as wives to 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." Now that quote he's using is sort of a summary.

It's not a quote of one particular passage. It's an allusion, especially to Deuteronomy 7, verses 1 through 5, where there is the forbidding of intermingling with the Canaanites. He says, 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 of these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you had consumed us, so that there would be no remnant nor 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. So he doesn't even so much ask for mercy, he just confesses sin. He just says we are guilty still.

We've been guilty through our entire history. Our ancestors have violated your laws all the way through, and now you've shown us special mercy, and we're repeating their

errors. And you have punished us less than our iniquities have deserved.

But we are still just taking advantage of that grace and acting as if there's no obligation on our part to obey you. And he says we can, I'm ashamed even to appear before you at this time because of this iniquity. Chapter 10, now while Ezra was praying and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large congregation of men, women, and children assembled to him from Israel.

For the people wept very bitterly. So he was just praying in the house of God himself out loud, probably very loudly as a matter of fact, on his knees with his hands raised. And as he prayed, and his prayer was probably longer than that which is recorded, this is probably more or less a digest of his prayer, probably was longer because while he was praying these people assembled.

The prayer as we have it here would only take about a minute to pray, and so they'd have to assemble rather rapidly, but in all likelihood he was praying over an extended period of time along these lines. And while he did, people came and heard him pray and they were touched. He didn't even have to turn and preach to the people.

His prayers touched them and brought them to weep very bitterly. And Shekeniah the son of Jehil, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, we have trespassed against our God and have taken wives, pagan wives, from the peoples of the land. Yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.

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 counsel 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.

That is, you're in charge of the country, so it's your responsibility to act to remedy this. We also will be with you. Be of good courage and do it.

Now it's been pointed out by commentators that the word in verse 2 that says we've taken pagan wives is not the ordinary word in the Hebrew for marriage. And that in verse 3 it says to put away these wives. To put away in this case is not the ordinary Hebrew word for divorce.

This may be not important because there can be more than one word that has the same concept. It may be just an unusual use of the synonym, but some scholars think that because we don't have the regular word for marriage or divorce that these might not have been regular marriages. They might have been shackled up.

They might have had not only paired up with the wrong people, but paired up without the sanction of marriage. And so that they had taken these women. Now the word wives can be translated as women.

So that they had taken these women who are pagans and even had children with them, but they might not have married them. And so it's not a hundred percent clear whether this is a actual case of divorcing them or simply separated from women that they should never been with in the first place. However we have to consider the possibility that this really was a case of them having married pagans in the normal and legal sense and offering to divorce them at this point.

Now it says, Ezra rose and made the leaders of the priests and the Levites and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath. Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohannan, the son of Elishab.

And when they came there he ate no bread and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity. He had also fasted on their journey before the journey at least and perhaps during the journey for protection on the road. Now he's fasting out of mourning.

Fasting was not part of the law of Moses. There was no command to fast with the exception of the day of atonement. Once a year they were supposed to fast among other things, other rituals associated with that day.

But fasting became a very important part of Jewish piety during the exile. And we find this in the book of Zechariah for example, that some exiles come back to Jerusalem and talk to the Prophet Zechariah and say, are we supposed to keep fasting like we have been for these past 70 years? And they had four days of the year that they fasted to mourn over different calamities that happened, the siege of Jerusalem, the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem, the murder of Goliath, some of the things that had happened that brought on their calamities. They had been fasting for 70 years, four times a year, four days out of the year.

And then in the days of Jesus, the Pharisees had institutionalized fasting into something they did twice a week. And so did the disciples of John the Baptist. So fasting after the exile became a normal part of piety among the Jews, though it was never commanded in the law.

And Jesus even talked as if his disciples would fast, though he never gave any command to do so. He simply said when he was asked why his disciples don't fast, and the disciples of John and of the Pharisees do fast, he said, well, while the bride grooms with people, they don't fast. But when he's taken away from them, they will fast.

He didn't command it, he just said it would happen. Likewise, when he was given the Sermon on the Mount, he said, when you fast, do not disfigure faces and so forth like the Pharisees do, like the hypocrites do. And this was as part of a triad of teaching about when you give alms, when you pray, when you fast.

Certainly we believe giving alms and prayer are normal practices that Christians are to be involved in. He seemed to assume that fasting would be part of the Christian life too. But institutionalizing fasting has never been shown to be a good thing in God's sight.

In Isaiah chapter 58, God complains that the Jews had institutionalized their fasting from food, but had neglected the things that God really cared about. He said, I don't really care about you skipping meals. I want you to skip the oppression, skip the sinning.

I want you to fast from evil, not from food. So fasting, when it is practiced, should be done, I think, as the Spirit leads and not necessarily on a schedule that's institutionalized for it. But here he was grieving and so he fasted.

And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity that they must gather at Jerusalem. And whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his property would be confiscated and he himself would be separated from the congregation of those from the captivity. So all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered at Jerusalem within three days.

It was the ninth month on the twelfth day of the month and all the people sat in the open square of the house of God trembling, not because of the word of God, but because of this matter and also because of the heavy rain. They were out in the rain. This was wintertime.

It was a cold rain and they were shivering. But standing out there in the rain was one way that they showed that they were sincere in wanting to get right about this matter. 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, 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 congregation 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 work 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 congregation 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 Azahel and Jehaziah the son of Tikva opposed this and Meshulam and Shabbathai, the Levite, gave their support. So there were a couple of leaders that opposed this policy. It's not clear whether they opposed the whole idea of divorcing the wives or if they opposed the idea of not doing it immediately.

It was suggested this will take a little while. We can't just do it all today. We have to go through the legal channels of divorce and such, so we got to spread this out over a period of time.

It's possible that those men, Jonathan and Jehaziah, opposed the delay or possibly they opposed the whole remedy. It's not made clear. In any case, this was decided to do this.

Then the descendants of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest with certain heads of the father's households were set apart by the father's households, each of them by name, and they sat down on the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. And the first day of the first month, which was obviously three months later, they finished questioning all the men who had taken pagan wives.

It turns out there were apparently about a hundred and ten men who were offenders. It took three months to handle their cases. That's only about, you know, thirty, that's about one a day, a little over one a day.

So they apparently looked into it very carefully because it was not a small matter to put away your wife and children. Imagine how heart-wrenching that would be. No doubt among the deliberations there had to be a decision made about who's going to take care of these children, how's the wife going to be provided for.

You can't be married to her but you can't just leave her as a, you know, a widow and your children as orphans. So there had to be some kind of arrangements made and so they apparently took a good long time looking at how to handle this in a way that would be, that would not leave these women and children victims. And among the sons of the priests who had taken pagan wives, the following were found of the sons of Jeshua, the son of Jezedach, and his brothers.

Maaziah, well we get a number of names here. Actually the truth is the rest of this book is a list of the names. Their names are not important enough for us to delay our completion of the class by reading them and that's all we would really be doing.

We'd simply be reading the names which occupy, what, twenty-four verses or so. The book ends with verse 44, all these had taken pagan wives and some of them had wives by whom they had children. Now the putting away of these pagan wives, no corresponding action would be appropriate for us.

That is when you find Christians who have married non-Christians, it's not appropriate to put them away. We don't even know if it was appropriate on this occasion. Ezra believed it was, but the story is descriptive not prescriptive.

It tells us that this is what Ezra and the people agreed to do. We're not told whether this was God's command or God approved of it or what. It's just what they did to try to rectify that situation.

In 1 Corinthians 7 verses 12 through 15, Paul gives instructions to Christians who are married to non-Christians. Almost certainly the cases he has in mind are cases of pagan couples where one of them has accepted Christ and the other has not. That they got married as two unbelievers but then one became a believer and the other did not.

So now we have a believer married to an unbeliever. Should they divorce the unbeliever? And the answer Paul gives is no, they should not. In 1 Corinthians 7 verses 10 through 12 he said that if a brother has a wife who does not believe or a sister has a husband that does not believe, let them not put them away.

That is, don't seek a divorce if they are content to dwell with you. But he said but if they're not content to dwell with you and they depart, let them go. And he said the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases.

So apparently a mixed-faith marriage can legitimately break up over the mixed-faith issue, but it should not be initiated by the believer. Why? Well, because you've made vows, you've made promises. You can't just break your vows just because you made a dumb vow.

I mean remember Joshua couldn't break his vow to the Gibeonites. Jephthah couldn't break his vow and spare his daughter. You don't make vows and break them if you fear God.

So you keep your vows. You may have made a stupid vow, a stupid commitment. You may have married the wrong person, but you stay.

And if they're an unbeliever and they want to stay, then you stay. And Paul says, how do you know that you might win your wife or your husband over to the Lord? If they're open to you being a Christian, they may be open to themselves becoming a Christian at some point. But if they depart, Paul says, let them go.

You're not under bondage. The marriage is over. And so just as Ezra actually had the Jews initiate these divorces, Paul allowed such divorces to take place if the Christian does not initiate it.

Because it would be an injustice on the part of the Christian to have made promises to their spouse and then break them. Some people say, well, you know, I made the promise before I was a believer and now I'm a Christian and if it ends in Christ, he's a new creation. And so, you know, the vow I took when I was a non-Christian doesn't matter, right? Wrong.

It's like saying I made a commitment to pay off my car before I was a Christian. Now I'm a Christian, I don't have to keep the commitment anymore, right? I don't pay my debts anymore. I borrowed a bunch of money before I was a Christian.

Now I'm a Christian, I don't have to pay my debts, right? Wrong. As a Christian, you have to be more diligent than ever to maintain your integrity. You don't get to become a liar and a cheat because you became a Christian.

You make promises and you become a Christian, you become more conscientious about your promises, not less so. But, of course, this was a special situation and I believe that it's probably the right thing that they did in Ezra's day. Though, as I said, it would not be something, it wouldn't be an action that would transfer as a duty to Christians in a similar situation today.

Okay, well, Ezra is mentioned again in Nehemiah chapter 8 in a ceremony where he reads and teaches the law to the people but we'll not take any more of Ezra's life at this point because, well, chronologically, we're going to go next into the life of Nehemiah and we'll simply find Ezra reappearing in that story in that next book.