

The Problem of Intermarriage with Foreign Women

Ezra 10

Ezra 10:1-8 - *“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. ² 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.³ 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. ⁴ Arise, for this matter is your responsibility. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it.” ⁵ 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. So they swore an oath. ⁶ 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. ⁷ And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem, ⁸ 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.”*

Background Notes

Did you know that about one-fourth of the book of Ezra was written in Aramaic? Most of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, but significant parts of the books of Daniel and Ezra are written in Aramaic. Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of Ezra's day - the common language. The Jewish people learned to speak Aramaic while they were living in Babylon. Another background note: the first two verses of the book of Ezra are identical to the last three verses of 2 Chronicles. This indicates a close connection between these books, and strongly suggests that Ezra was the author of both 1 and 2 Chronicles, as well as the book of Ezra.

In chapter 9, Ezra was confronted with a major problem. A number of men had intermarried with the heathen women of the land - women who followed pagan religions. Some of these marriages had produced children (Ezra 10:44). What was the solution to this problem? In chapter 9 we saw Ezra's distress and remorse for this serious sin, and his prayer of confession of the sin for the nation. In Ezra 10 the disciplinary action was taken.

Doctrinal Points

1. Discipline of God's people is demanded.

After Ezra's great prayer of confession, a large number of concerned people gathered in the Temple courts, and joined him in "very bitter weeping." Notice that the group included men, women, and children (v1). When God's people sin, everyone in the fellowship should be concerned to the point of weeping, confessing, and praying together.

Shechaniah was the spokesman for the people. He said, "Even though we have greatly sinned, there is still hope for us as a nation" (v2). What did he mean? On the basis of God's Law in Deuteronomy 30, Shechaniah knew that if the people were concerned about the sin, confessed it, did something about it, and disciplined those involved in it, then God would be merciful and compassionate. God would not renew His anger at their sin, or turn away from His people.

That biblical principle is still God's method of operation for believers today. **When there is discipline for sin, there is hope!** A New Testament example: a believer in the church at Corinth was involved in serious sexual sin, so discipline was required. The apostle Paul told the church leaders to "expel the wicked person from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:13). Discipline was demanded, so the man was expelled from the fellowship. But that's not the end of the story! The discipline worked, and the man was restored to the fellowship (2 Corinthians 2).

When there is discipline, there is hope - but discipline is necessary. We can't sweep sin under the rug, or cover it up. The entire congregation doesn't need to know all the details, but the spiritual leaders of the local church must deal with the sin. Shechaniah told Ezra, who was the spiritual leader: "Rise up, for this matter is your responsibility. We will support you, so take courage, and do it" (v4). Notice - it takes courage and support to discipline God's people.

Do you support your spiritual leaders when they must exercise discipline? Or do you complain, gossip, disagree and argue with them? Convicting questions, aren't they? Spiritual leaders aren't perfect, but God has given them authority, and part of their responsibility is to discipline God's people. That's taught here in the book of Ezra. We should support and encourage our spiritual leaders if they must exercise spiritual discipline.

Ezra and the other spiritual leaders proposed that everyone should assemble in Jerusalem to settle this matter. Anyone who refused to come would be excluded from the assembly of God's people. The discipline of God's people is demanded.

2. Discipline of God's people is difficult.

Ezra 10:9-17 - "So all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth 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. ¹⁰ Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. ¹¹ 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."

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.” ¹⁵ Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite gave them support.

¹⁶ 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 first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. ¹⁷ By the first day of the first month they finished questioning all the men who had taken pagan wives.”

Verses 18-43 list the names of all those who were found guilty: 17 priests (v18-22); 10 Levites and 4 singers (v23-24); 84 other men (v25-43). [For sake of time, these verses were omitted.]

Ezra 10:44 - *“All these had taken pagan wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children.”*

These “pagan wives” were women who came from the non-Jewish peoples of the land – people who followed pagan religions. To solve this serious problem, local leaders and judges were chosen to investigate the situation in their own areas, on a case-by-case basis, because the local leaders would understand more of the details. *“Ezra the priest selected men who were family heads, one from each family division, and all of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to investigate the cases, and by the first day of the first month they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women (v16-17).*

The investigation took three months. Presumably, the marriages of those men whose pagan wives had become believers in the God of Israel, who had been brought into the covenant community, were allowed to remain. The Old Testament Law made provision for proselyte wives. But the purity of God’s covenant people was to be maintained, so wives who refused to leave their pagan gods and religions were “put away.” The marriages were dissolved. Presumably financial provision was made, and the women and their children returned to the women’s birth families.

It’s important to remember that this directive was given to Israel under the commandments of the Old Testament Law.

This directive was **not** given for Christians in the Church today. Christians are **not** to seek a divorce from an unbeliever in a mixed marriage (1 Corinthians 7).

The proper discipline was carried out in Ezra’s day, but it was not easy. Proper discipline is never easy, whether in Ezra’s time, or in the family or the Church today. Here are a few reasons why discipline of God’s people is difficult - in Ezra’s day and today.

a. **Some people don’t agree** (v15). Four men disagreed. Perhaps they thought the discipline was too harsh - or perhaps they thought it was too lenient!

b. **Some priests, Levites and other leaders were involved.** The leaders should have been models for the people, but they were part of the problem. When spiritual leaders sin, people in the congregation are disillusioned, and they may even falter in their faith.

c. **Family connections.** The discipline of God's people is difficult because there are often family connections within the church. This can make discipline very difficult.

d. **The problem may resurface.** Just one generation later, the sin of intermarriage had occurred once again, and the leaders had to deal with the problem all over again (see Nehemiah 13).

All these reasons make the discipline of God's people difficult, both then and today. The discipline of God's people is difficult.

Practical Application

Let's be "firm but flexible," like Ezra!

This chapter reveals that Ezra was a firm disciplinarian. When the people disobeyed God's Word, he didn't back down from his responsibility to discipline. But even though he was firm in God's righteous standards, Ezra was reasonable and flexible. He was a good leader.

In verses 12-14 the people said, "You're right, Ezra. We're guilty. But please give us some time to investigate and settle this problem case-by-case, on an individual basis. And by the way, Ezra - did you notice it's raining? We're freezing in this cold rain!" Ezra wasn't unreasonable. Notice what he did **not** say. He didn't say, "Rain or no rain - we're going to settle this right now. No one leaves the Temple courts until this matter is settled!" No. Ezra was firm - but he was also flexible.

"Firm, but flexible" is a sign of a good leader. Ezra listened to reason. So - whether it's discipline in the family or discipline in the church - let's be firm but flexible, like Ezra.