

Ezra-Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

“Holy Challenging!”

Introduction: It is always gratifying when, as a teacher, your students begin to “get it,” especially when their new understanding seems to make a difference in their lives. Last week we met a teacher named Ezra. This morning we’ll see how his students “got it.” But we’ll also wonder if they got it right.

Ezra, as we met him last week, had been brought by God to Jerusalem, leading a second wave of returnees home from their exile in Babylon in 458 B.C. He was described as “well versed in the Law of Moses” (first 5 books of the Bible), studying it, observing it, and teaching it. Part of his role was to spiritually rebuild and restore this community, following their long time away, helping them to come to know the God who loved them, who had rescued them, and who had called them to be his people. What should that look like? It’s a question they were asking upon their return and it’s one we’ve been asking as we think about our own return in these pandemic riddled days.

As we continue in the narrative today, we’ll consider an episode in the life of Ezra’s students—this community of returnees from Babylon—in which the word of God that Ezra had been teaching had pricked their consciences and moved them to make wholesale changes in their lives. But I’m left wondering how it all felt to Ezra, and his people. Was the decision they all made the right one? Let me just leave you with that question for a moment while we listen to the text together.

I. A People Called to Distinctiveness

A. The time indicators in the text reveal that Ezra had been teaching the people for just over four months. At some point during that time, a group of leaders came to Ezra and confessed that some of the people, including some of the spiritual leaders, had not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples but had actually married some of these “foreign women.” What’s the issue here and what is at stake?

B. The “neighboring peoples” were those who had been resettled in the land over the years by various conquering powers. The Israelites were taken into exile and various foreigners were put in their place. These foreign residents were now deeply settled in the land and were the neighbors of the returning exiles. Importantly for our discussion, they worshipped other gods and engaged in “detestable practices,” just like Israel’s enemies of old had done. The list of these enemies in 9:1 reads like a “Who’s Who” of those who had plagued the Israelites over the years. Their detestable practices included various forms of idolatry, worship of the stars, cult prostitution, and child sacrifice, all of which the Israelites would have found being practiced among those who were now their neighbors in Jerusalem. The problem was that instead of sharing the goodness and grace of the Lord with their neighbors, inviting them to experience a transformed life, the Israelites had begun to take on the practices of this culture.

Psalm 106:35-37 puts well their need for rescue: “[the Israelites] mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshipped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and daughters to false gods.” This was said of the Israelites who came out of Egypt and entered the Promised Land, and could now be said of those coming out of Babylon back into the PL.

C. This was light years from what God had desired. You may remember that when he rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he went on to give them an identity and a mission. He called them to fulfill the promise he had made through Abraham, that Abraham's descendants would bring God's blessing to all nations. They would do this by being a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Ex. 19:4-6). As "priests," they would take on a kind of mediatorial role, bringing their neighbors to God and revealing God to them. In order to be that kind of priestly people, they would need to be a "holy" people. This meant that they were not necessarily to be "super religious," nor were they to withdraw from the world. Instead, they were to be a distinct or different kind of people from the neighboring nations while now living among them. The most succinct summary of that distinctiveness comes in Leviticus 18:3 –

"You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices."

The goal was that if Israel lived in the way God intended, in the whole range of social, economic, political, judicial, and familial contexts, their neighbors would take note (cf. Deut. 4:6).

D. So, it wasn't the "foreignness" of the women some of these men had married that was the issue. Interracial marriage is not what is forbidden. Nor is there any justification for racism here. Over the years, Abraham and Joseph and Moses and Boaz all married foreign women, and one of them, Ruth, even appears in the genealogy of Jesus. It was not the people who were the issue but the practices of those who had not become fully devoted followers of the Lord that would threaten to lure the Israelites away, not only from what the Lord had called them to do, but from the Lord himself. This was dangerous territory the Israelites had entered (cf. Solomon, 1 Kings 11).

E. Now, marriage to just one person can still be challenging when your partner does not share the same ultimate values that you have, when he or she is trying to live in a Story other than the grace of God, as revealed in the sacrificial love of Jesus on the cross. In that situation, you may well find that a cultural challenge exists right within your marriage. In your effort to keep the peace, or experience intimacy, your relationship with God, and who God desires you to be, may suffer.

II. The Proper Solution?

A. So, living distinctly as God's chosen people was critical, and marriage to a spouse of another faith put this distinction, and hence God's mission, at risk for those in the community who were participating in idolatry and other pagan practices. Learning that this was happening sends Ezra into an intense period of mourning and prayerful weeping in which he confessed the sin of the people and called upon the mercy of God. Members of the community joined him. Then, after much discussion, a decision was arrived at. It was to send the foreign wives, and their children, away. It was nothing short of a mass divorce, of 111 couples, the list of which took three months to figure out. At one point they were even forced inside due to the rain. Maybe the rain was from God, telling them to stop?! It seems like an incredibly harsh solution. Was this the right decision?

B. Interestingly, we never really hear directly from God. We hear about making the decision according to the Law (10:3), but there actually was no specific law in the Torah that dealt with what to do once an interfaith marriage had taken place. Further, this is the genre of narrative that we have been looking at which means it's descriptive – it tells us what happens – it's not prescriptive – it doesn't necessarily tell us what was right or wrong or should always happen.

C. What can we say?

1. Whatever this community gleaned from the law as they sought to apply it to this situation, they seemed to have forgotten the bit in the Law about caring for the widow, orphan, and foreigner in their midst. Sending the foreign wives and children away, causing them to bear the brunt of the unfaithfulness to God of the Israelite men—to atone for their sin—seems to put the blame in the wrong place.

2. This solution of mass divorce did not seem to solve anything in the long run. For, a couple of decades later, the same problem arises again under Nehemiah's leadership. Worth noting is that the solution under Nehemiah was different than that arrived at under Ezra. The husbands got a good going over by Nehemiah, but the marriages were left intact. Instead, the parents were required to take an oath not to marry their children off to those of the neighboring peoples (Neh. 13:23-27). Yet, years later, as the prophet Malachi describes it, the situation arises even again (2:11-12)! Could it be that simply sending someone away, or forbidding a certain action, doesn't really change the heart? It reminds me of the warning Jesus makes about washing the outside of the dish while the inside, which runs everything, remains unclean? A religion based on rules is never what the God, who says the greatest commandment is to love him with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourself, had in mind.

3. The apostle Paul endeavors to help us think about what grace might look like when he encourages the Corinthian church that if one partner in a marriage comes to faith in Christ, he/she need not divorce their unbelieving partner but stay in the marriage and seek to be a holy, loving, Christian influence on their unbelieving partner ("sanctifies") (1 Cor. 7:12-16). A challenge to be sure, but one as God's chosen people we are called to in all of our relationships, seeking to love our neighbor as ourself.

4. Living on this side of the cross, it is gratefully Jesus, not the wives and children, who is sent away; on the cross, he was abandoned for our sakes. The penalty for our sin is borne by him; he was sent away so that no one else need be. Such sacrificial love is what begins to transform our hearts, it's what helps us stay faithful to God, it's what enables us to turn away from loving other gods and turn toward being agents of transformation for others, for those in our marriages, in our families, in our neighborhoods, at our places of work, and in our churches.

For, as we move into the NT, God's call on his people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation continues; now it's applied not to the one nation of Israel, but to the church throughout many nations.

As Peter writes to the church (1 Pe. 2:9):

You [the church] are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Peter goes on to explain that we declare such praises as we seek ongoing transformation of our own lives so that those around us may see the distinct way we are living and [eventually, hopefully] glorify God.

The holy challenge is for us to reflect more and more of the character of Christ, and less and less of the character of our culture. May God give us the grace to discern what this looks like, in our marriages, families, neighborhoods, churches, and places of work.