

## 12. Dealing With Bad Decisions (4Q 2019—Ezra and Nehemiah)

**Biblical Material:** Neh. 13:23–25; Deut. 7:3, 4; 2 Cor. 6:14; Ezra 9, 10; 1 Cor. 7:10–17.

### Quotes

- You can't always expect people to apply your wisdom when they didn't use wisdom before they found themselves knee deep in their version of justice. *Shannon L. Alder*
- Good people can do bad things, make bad decisions. It doesn't make them bad people. *Sonia Sotomayor*
- It's not that I've been invited to the hole I'm standing in. It's that I accepted the invitation. *Craig D. Lounsbrough*
- The whole point of life is learning to live with the consequences of the bad decision we've made. *Sherrilyn Kenyon*
- There is no stigma attached to recognizing a bad decision in time to install a better one. *Laurence J. Peter*
- With all these forks in the roads of our path, why do so many choose to take the knife? *Anthony Liccione*

### Questions

What was the real problem that is at the heart of this week's study? While the study examines the issue of intermarriage between Israelites and others, how can we deal with other bad decisions? How do we avoid making bad decisions in the first place? What are some of the more pressing issues facing us today as believers?

### Bible Summary

Neh. 13:23–25 examines the problem of intermarriage with people of pagan nations, and also the fact that many children of such marriages couldn't speak Hebrew. This not only integration into society difficult, but more importantly it was a barrier to religious instruction. Deut. 7:3, 4 is the instruction to the Israelites not to marry people of other nations. The reason is also given—that to do so will lead Israel into idolatry. “Don't join together with people who don't believe...” (2 Cor. 6:14 FBV). Ezra 9 and 10 give Ezra's response to the issue of intermarriage with those of enemy nations. Paul gives updated thinking on marriage between believers and unbelievers in a different context (1 Cor. 7:10–17.).

### Comment

So we all make bad decisions. As the title of this study, it's how we deal with them that's significant. Surely the first objective is recognize our mistakes. Without that first step there can be no corrective action. This implies that we do have a good operating system and that we don't have excessive impairment of our examination of the evidence and its implications. In other words, we have to be able to think and reflect on what we've done as objectively as possible.

As Christians this means taking it all back to how we understand right and wrong, good and bad, and most of all how this relates to our concepts of God. For if we think of God in some ways then we can end up calling evil good, and good evil. Belief systems can easily get in the way. For example, in the sixteenth-century, English Catholic Queen Mary, often known as “Bloody Mary,” justified her persecution of heretics and burning them at the stake like this: “As

the souls of heretics are to be forever burning in hell, there can be nothing more proper than for me to imitate the Divine vengeance by burning them on earth.” A reasonable justification?

The issue we’re looking at this week is the problem of intermarriage between the Israelites and those nations around them, usually hostile, but more importantly pagan. The reason for the prohibition given in Deuteronomy was because it would encourage idolatry. That this had already happened to a large extent even before the Exile is clear. That it continued after the Return is more of a surprise. That Ezra and Nehemiah had really appreciated the extent of the problem is also surprising. In order to comply with the requirement of the Mosaic law these marriages had to be dissolved. This obviously created a great deal of family disruption and personal pain for those involved.

The question before us is a hard one: was this the best, or only, solution? Was it simply a question of compliance with a divinely-given law? While the post-exilic Jewish society was certainly very keen to avoid the problems that had led them into captivity, had they simply become religiously legalistic? And what of the leadership? For Ezra, Nehemiah and the others it was definitely an issue of not complying with a divine requirement. But Nehemiah also makes it clear that he looked beyond the letter of the law. He observed that children from such mixed marriages often could not speak Hebrew but “could only speak the language of Ashdod or that of another people...” That Ashdod was one of the principal cities of the Philistines makes the problem very clear.

Nehemiah also goes on to say, “Wasn’t it marriages like these that made King Solomon of Israel sin? There wasn’t a king in any nation like him. God loved him, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was made to sin by foreign women.” (Neh. 13:26 FBV). The idolatry issue was a major factor in Nehemiah’s mind, probably also including problems of national identity and social cohesion.

Theirs was a dramatic way of dealing with bad decisions, and they took a decision to enforce a correction of the bad decisions of others. The question remains: is this a model for us today, and what lessons can we learn?

### **Ellen White Comments**

These unlawful alliances caused great confusion; for some who entered into them were persons in high position, rulers of the people and men connected with service of God, to whom, in the absence of Nehemiah, the people had a right to look for counsel and correct example. God had carefully excluded the heathen from uniting with his faithful worshipers; but the divinely erected barriers had been broken down, and as a consequence of mingling and intermarrying with other nations, the Israel of God were fast losing their peculiar, holy character. Nehemiah knew that ruin was before the nation if this evil were not put away, and he reasoned with these men on the subject. He firmly and fearlessly declared, “Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.” He presented the case of Solomon, and reminded them that among many nations there had arisen no king like this man, whom God had favored, and to whom he had given great wisdom. But the idolatrous women whom he connected with his house by marriage, led his heart astray from God, and his example had a corrupting influence on all Israel. The commands and threatenings of the Lord, and the fearful judgments visited upon Israel in past generations, aroused the consciences of the people. The strongest and most endearing ties that bound them to idolaters were broken. Not only were future marriages with the heathen forbidden, but marriages already formed were dissolved. {ST, January 24, 1884 par. 2}