

Dealing With Bad Decisions



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Neh. 13:23–25; Deut. 7:3, 4; 2 Cor. 6:14; Ezra 9; Ezra 10; 1 Cor. 7:10–17.*

Memory Text: “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’ ” (*Ezra 9:6, NKJV*).

Ezra and Nehemiah became leaders in communities in which intermarriage with non-Israelites had become the norm. Both leaders were strongly concerned about this, as they wanted to lead the nation into a close relationship with God. They were aware of the negative influence that nonbelievers or idol worshipers could have on the people of Israel, as they had seen the terrible effects throughout history. The Canaanite religions spread throughout Israel until Baal and Asherah were being worshiped on every high hill. Moreover, the influence that pagan spouses had on the Israelite families was detrimental. Balaam advised the Moabites to send their women to the Israelites, sure that the Israelites would turn away from God as they fell for these women. Unfortunately, he was right. Not only do spouses influence each other, but also their children's faith is impacted.

What will Ezra and Nehemiah do with Israel's intermarriage situation? Will they let it go or stand up against it? This week we will look at the way the two leaders approached this issue.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 21.*

Nehemiah's Reaction

Read Nehemiah 13:23–25. What happened here, and how do we explain Nehemiah's reaction to the situation?

Since the children didn't speak Aramaic (the language used during the Exile) or Hebrew, they couldn't understand the teachings from Scripture. This was a real problem, because the knowledge of God's revelation could thus be distorted or even disappear. The scribes and priests expounded on the Torah mostly in Aramaic in order to make the preaching clear to the people. However, since the mothers were from Ammon, Ashdod, and Moab and were generally the primary caregivers for the children, it is not surprising that the children didn't speak the language of the fathers, as well. The language we speak informs the way we think about concepts, because we use the vocabulary of that culture. Loss of the biblical language would have meant losing their special identity. Thus, for Nehemiah, it was unthinkable that families were losing touch with the Word of God and consequently their connection with the living God, the Lord of the Hebrews.

Biblical scholars point out that the actions of Nehemiah were most likely a public shaming of the people as part of prescribed punishments at that time. When it says that Nehemiah rebuked them and cursed them, we shouldn't think of Nehemiah using foul language and expletives, but rather that he was speaking over them the curses of the Covenant. Deuteronomy 28 outlines the curses that would happen to those who broke the covenant. It is very possible that Nehemiah chose the words of the Bible to bring them to the realization of their wrong action and the consequences of their poor choices.

Moreover, when the text says that Nehemiah "beat some of the men and pulled out their hair" (*Neh. 13:25, NIV*), instead of seeing Nehemiah in a rage and reacting with fury, we should note that a beating was a prescribed form of public punishment. This kind of behavior was applied only to "some" of them, meaning to the leaders who caused or promoted this wrong behavior. These acts were to serve as methods of public shaming. Nehemiah wanted to ensure that the people understood the gravity of their choices and the results that would ensue from them.

How should we react when we see what we believe is wrongdoing in the church?

Nehemiah's Reproof

Read Nehemiah 13:26, 27. What does this show about how important biblical history is for informing us about the dangers of deviating from the right path?

Solomon was led deeper into sin by the choices he made. It would be accurate to say that Solomon caused his own ruin by disobeying God's command for the kings of Israel: "Neither shall he [the king] multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away" (*Deut. 17:17, NKJV*). Solomon's life is used as a negative example: not only did he marry more than one wife, but significantly, as Nehemiah points out, he chose women who were not worshipers of God.

Why was Nehemiah correct in reproving the nation for intermarriage with pagans? *Gen. 6:1–4; Gen. 24:3, 4; Gen. 28:1, 2; Deut. 7:3, 4; and 2 Cor. 6:14.*

The command not to intermarry was not about nationalism but about idolatry. People in the Bible married non-Israelites. Moses married Zipporah, a Midianite woman; Boaz married Ruth, a Moabite. Instead, the issue with intermarriage in these commands concerns marrying someone who is of a different faith or of no faith. The problem was that the people in Ezra and Nehemiah's time did not choose to marry believers in God. Richard M. Davidson, in *Flame of Yahweh* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), states: "The Edenic plan for marriage . . . called for a complementary wholeness of two partners in spiritual faith as well as other significant values."—Page 316. The pagan wives in this story did not choose to renounce idolatrous worship. Consequently, Nehemiah was perhaps more saddened than outraged by the choices of the people, since to him this demonstrated a lack of real commitment to God.

The Bible gives us formulas for practices that will keep us grounded in God and are designed to maximize our happiness. In the same way, the command to be equally yoked in marriage was supposed to help us lead a better life and to encourage mutual devotion to God.

What principles can we take from these accounts today that can help us protect our faith and that of our family?

Ezra Reacts

Read Ezra 9. How does Ezra respond to hearing about the Israelites' intermarriages? Ezra 9:1, 2 states that the people "have not separated themselves." The word "separated" is used in the following verses, as well: *Lev. 10:10; 11:47; Exod. 26:33; Gen. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18*. What does the use of this word imply about the issue of a believer marrying an unbeliever?

The people approached Ezra with the issue of intermarriage themselves. The terminology they used by listing the nations involved in abominations demonstrated their knowledge of the Torah, as the list is taken directly from biblical accounts. Interestingly, the civil leaders brought the news to Ezra, as even the spiritual leaders of the nation, priests and Levites, were guilty of this transgression.

"In his study of the causes leading to the Babylonish captivity, Ezra had learned that Israel's apostasy was largely traceable to their mingling with heathen nations. He had seen that if they had obeyed God's command to keep separate from the nations surrounding them, they would have been spared many sad and humiliating experiences. Now when he learned that notwithstanding the lessons of the past, men of prominence had dared transgress the laws given as a safeguard against apostasy, his heart was stirred within him. He thought of God's goodness in again giving His people a foothold in their native land, and he was overwhelmed with righteous indignation and with grief at their ingratitude."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 620.

The word "separate" is used for contrasting entities. In fact, it denotes complete opposites. By this statement the people acknowledged a prior understanding and knowledge of God's command to stay away from false religions. They understood that no one could say that he or she will marry a spouse whose contrasting beliefs will have no impact on the marriage relationship or how they raise their children. They realized how serious the situation had become.

What can we do to seek to keep faith alive in our homes and families, even if we have made wrong decisions in the past?

Ezra Acts

Read Ezra 10. How did Ezra and the leaders tackle the issue of intermarriage?

Together, the whole assembly decided to send the foreign wives away. Amazingly, even those who married them agreed with the plan, except for the four men mentioned by name in Ezra 10:15. The Jews promised to send their spouses away, and it took three months for the plan to be carried out. In the end, 111 Jewish men sent their wives away (*Ezra 10:18–43*). Interestingly, the last verse (*Ezra 10:44*) states that some of these mixed marriages already had children. Sending away the mothers from families with children doesn't seem rational or even right to us. However, we must remember that this was a unique time, during which God was starting over with the Jewish nation, and, in a sense, they with Him. Fully following God required radical measures.

The specific words used in Ezra 10:11, 19 for “separate yourself” (*badal*) and “put away” (*yatza'*) are not used anywhere else in the Scriptures for divorce. Ezra would have known the terminology regularly used for divorce, but he chose not to use it. Thus it is apparent that Ezra did not consider the marriages valid after it was discovered that they were in violation of the Torah command. In other words, the marriages were nullified because they were contrary to the law. The process was dissolution of invalid marriages. However, we are not given information on what happened to those wives and children and what impact this action had on the community. According to the custom of that time, the former husbands would have taken care of the transfer of their former wives and their children. The wives normally would have gone back to their native fathers' homes.

Over time, however, some Jewish men once again began to marry unbelievers, and perhaps some even returned to the wives they sent away. The fleeting nature of the solution can be attributed to human nature and our up-and-down cycle of commitment to God. Even those of us who consider ourselves strong believers have to admit that we have gone through periods of lesser dedication to God, when our walk with Him could have accurately been described as wanting. Unfortunately, humanity struggles with putting God first.

What has been your experience with times of “lesser dedication to God”? What have you learned from those experiences?

Marriage Today

From what we have seen in Ezra and Nehemiah about this issue of mixed marriages, it's clear that God takes marriage seriously, and that we should, as well. We should prayerfully consider a potential marriage partner, and include God in the decision-making. And we should decide to be faithful to God's principles, which can protect us from much sadness and misery.

Look up how Paul was dealing with this issue when a Christian had an unbelieving spouse. Study carefully 1 Corinthians 7:10–17. How should we approach marriages that are unequally yoked today?

Because we have no elaborate command in the Bible on what to do with interfaith marriages, it would be very unwise and run against the intention of the text and its principles to insist that separating from the unbelieving spouse is the right approach and, based on this account by Ezra, must be recommended. Ezra-Nehemiah's situation was a onetime event and according to God's will (*Ezra 10:11*), because the future and worship of the whole community of Israel was at risk. They were losing their identity as worshipers of a living God.

We know that in the Jewish Elephantine settlement in Egypt (contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah) the leaders allowed intermixed marriages and shortly developed a mixed religion with Yahweh and his pagan consort, the goddess Anat. Additionally, the Messianic line was in danger. Therefore, this onetime event shouldn't be taken as a prescription for the breaking up of marriages and families whenever a believer marries an unbeliever. Instead, the account does demonstrate the high value God places on equally yoked partnership in marriage. Satan is happy when we end up married to a person who does not encourage devotion to God, because he knows that if both spouses have the same conviction, then they will be stronger in their mission work for God than if just one is faithful.

While the Bible clearly counsels against unequally yoked marriages (*2 Cor: 6:14*), we also find passages of extended grace to those who have made a different choice. God empowers those who have married unbelievers to be faithful to God and their spouses. God doesn't abandon us even when we make choices contrary to His will, and if we ask Him for help, He will provide it. This doesn't mean that we do whatever we want and then expect God to bless us nevertheless, but rather that when we come to Him with a need and a humble heart, He always hears. Without God's grace there would be no hope for any of us, because we are all sinners.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Reformation,” pp. 669–678, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“Industry in a God-appointed duty is an important part of true religion. Men should seize circumstances as God’s instruments with which to work His will. Prompt and decisive action at the right time will gain glorious triumphs, while delay and neglect result in failure and dishonor to God. If the leaders in the cause of truth show no zeal, if they are indifferent and purposeless, the church will be careless, indolent, and pleasure-loving; but if they are filled with a holy purpose to serve God and Him alone, the people will be united, hopeful, eager.

“The word of God abounds in sharp and striking contrasts. Sin and holiness are placed side by side, that, beholding, we may shun the one and accept the other. The pages that describe the hatred, falsehood, and treachery of Sanballat and Tobiah, describe also the nobility, devotion, and self-sacrifice of Ezra and Nehemiah. We are left free to copy either, as we choose. The fearful results of transgressing God’s commands are placed over against the blessings resulting from obedience. We ourselves must decide whether we will suffer the one or enjoy the other.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 676.

Discussion Questions:

- ① As we read these stories, it seems clear that many of the people weren’t dedicated to God in the first place, which is why they chose pagan wives. Thus, Ezra doesn’t just leave them to their own devices, but attempts to reprove and correct them in hopes of achieving change. Did the change truly occur though? By changing their behavior, did they change within? Did their devotion to God truly grow? What evidence do we have that many of them didn’t really change? What can we learn from their mistakes about how important a change of heart really is?
- ② What are ways that we can help those in our church who might be struggling with the problems that come from unwise marriages?
- ③ Though God’s principles are eternal and absolute, cultures vary greatly. Why must we keep these differences in mind as we seek to apply God’s principles to our own lives and situations?

God's Math

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Jannie Bekker, a genteel South African with wavy blond hair, was deployed to Vietnam's capital with \$2 million and the momentous task of establishing the Seventh-day Adventist Church's first "urban center of influence" in the southeast Asian country.

Bekker, however, struggled to find a suitable property in Hanoi. The asking price for a vacant lot topped \$2 million and often approached \$3 million to \$4 million.

Bekker prayed as he made trip after trip to Hanoi from the Singapore-based headquarters of the Adventist Church's Southeast Asia Union Mission, where he works as special assistant to the president.

"I've lost count of how many trips I've made to Vietnam," Bekker said. "It was 15 or 20 maybe."

Bekker was assigned the job after Adventist Church president Ted N. C. Wilson appealed for a community center to serve the people of Hanoi in 2014. Wilson—who spoke after visiting the city and leading milestone evangelistic meetings in Ho Chi Minh City—pledged to help raise the needed funds, with the understanding that he would match the amount contributed by the Southern Asia-Pacific Division and Southeast Asia Union Mission. In the end, the Adventist world church gave \$1 million, and the division and union each gave \$500,000.

But Bekker couldn't find a plot of land. The properties that he inspected cost too much or were badly located. A potential deal fell through.

Then a friend of a friend introduced Bekker to a developer who owned a lot and was constructing a seven-story building on it. The developer wanted only \$1.8 million for everything. The moment that Bekker saw the property, he knew it was perfect.

Bureaucracy and other snags delayed the purchase for months. Another buyer caught wind of the property and offered a larger amount of money. Bekker kept praying, and the developer ultimately rejected the new offer, saying the Adventist plan sought to benefit the community and not enrich the owners.

Bekker beamed with joy on May 22, 2018, as Wilson and other leaders inaugurated the seven-story building, which will house a bookstore, a health-food store, a foreign-language school, a music school, a health center, ADRA's Vietnam headquarters, and meeting halls for two congregations.

"God came through in a more miraculous way than I ever, ever anticipated," Bekker said. "He gave us more than what we prayed for. We give all honor and glory to Him."

