

## ***Ezra and Nehemiah***

### ***Dealing with Bad Decisions***

Lesson #12 for December 21, 2019

Scriptures: Nehemiah 13:23-25; Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Ezra 9&10; 1 Corinthians 7:10-17.

1. This lesson will deal with one of the major challenges that Ezra and, later, Nehemiah faced when they tried to restore the nation of Israel to its God-intended ideal.
2. They knew that the Jews were surrounded by hostile nations who were at the same time idolatrous and fertility cult worshipers. Back in the days of Ahab and Jezebel and as a high priestess of Baal, Jezebel was determined to convert the people of the northern kingdom to become Baal worshipers. She employed up to 850 priests to accomplish that task. Unfortunately, she was very successful. (1 Kings 18:19)
3. Even earlier, we know the story of Balaam recorded in Numbers 23 and following. And then, the experience with the Moabitess women recorded in Numbers 25 and the devastating effect it had on the Israelites. Balaam knew something that we all should recognize; that is, the people of God could only be conquered if they turned away from their worship of the one true God.
4. We have already talked about the problem of Sabbath worship and Nehemiah closing the gates to the traders who wanted to conduct their business on the Sabbath. Also, we have discussed the fact that the children of Israel had stopped paying a faithful tithe, probably for several reasons. But, for those from the tribe of Levi who were dependent upon the tithes, it was necessary to return to farms to try to support themselves. Now, we will deal with one of the major challenges that affected both Ezra and Nehemiah at different times in their attempts to rehabilitate the Jews.

**Nehemiah 13:23-25:** <sup>23</sup> At that time I also discovered that many of the Jewish men had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. <sup>24</sup>**Half their children spoke the language of Ashdod or some other language and didn't know how to speak our language.** <sup>25</sup>I reprimanded the men, called down curses on them, beat them, and pulled out their hair. Then I made them take an oath in God's name that never again would they or their children intermarry with foreigners.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Nehemiah 13:23–25). New York: American Bible Society.<sup>†</sup>

5. Even though the children had Jewish fathers, those who did not speak Aramaic—the language used during and after the exile—or Hebrew could not have understood the teachings from Scripture. Jewish men, many of them from among the Jewish leaders, had married wives from Ammon, Ashdod, and Moab. Ashdod was a city in the Philistine territory; Ammon and Moab were countries to the east inhabited by the descendants of Lot.
6. We know about the story of Boaz and Ruth. Ruth was a young woman who chose to follow Israel's God and went with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to live in Bethlehem. No one had any problem with assimilating this young woman into the Jewish religion and nation. There were probably some who had followed that example in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. **But, the real problem was the fact that others had moved into Jewish territory while continuing their idolatrous and fertility cult practices of worship.**
7. Deuteronomy 28 outlines the curses that would fall upon those who disobeyed God. It is likely

that Nehemiah was publicly shaming these rebels and calling down on them the words of God from Deuteronomy 28.

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.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Sunday, December 15.<sup>‡§</sup>

8. How should we respond if we see wrongdoing taking place in the church today? How should we respond if the wrongdoing is done by an individual? What if we feel that the wrongdoing is being done by the church as a whole? Or, by its leaders? (See Matthew 18:15-17.)

**Nehemiah 13:26-27:** <sup>26</sup>I said, “It was foreign women that made King Solomon sin. He was a man who was greater than any of the kings of other nations. God loved him and made him king over all Israel, and yet he fell into this sin. <sup>27</sup>Are we then to follow your example and disobey our God by marrying foreign women?”—*Good News Bible.\**

9. Certainly, the story of Solomon would have been familiar to all of the Jewish people. They recognized Solomon’s sins and the fact that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines! How long did it take to marry them? A careful review of Israelite history shows that his high taxes and his marriage to foreign women led to the breakup of the Israelite nation into Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This was directly contrary to the instructions given by Moses.

**Deuteronomy 17:14-20:** [Moses said:] <sup>14</sup> “After you have taken possession of the land that the LORD your God is going to give you and have settled there, then you will decide you need a king like all the nations round you. <sup>15</sup>Make sure that the man you choose to be king is the one whom the LORD has chosen. He must be one of your own people; do not make a foreigner your king. <sup>16</sup>The king is not to have a large number of horses for his army, and he is not to send people to Egypt to buy horses, because the LORD has said that his people are never to return there. <sup>17</sup>**The king is not to have many wives, because this would make him turn away from the LORD; and he is not to make himself rich with silver and gold.** <sup>18</sup>When he becomes king, he is to have a copy of the book of God’s laws and teachings made from the original copy kept by the levitical priests. <sup>19</sup>He is to keep this book near him and read from it all his life, so that he will learn to honour the LORD and to obey faithfully everything that is commanded in it. <sup>20</sup>This will keep him from thinking that he is better than his fellow-Israelites and from disobeying the LORD’s commands in any way. Then he will reign for many years, and his descendants will rule Israel for many generations.”—*Good News Bible.\*†‡*

10. What if they had followed these directions in every detail? Did King David?
11. Read Genesis 6:1-4; 24:3-4; 28:1-2; Deuteronomy 7:3-4; and 2 Corinthians 6:14. In the passage from Genesis 6, it is talking about events which took place before the flood. Were these women—called the *daughters of men*—directed by Satan himself in accomplishing what they did? Were these women “attractive” naturally? Or, were they a part of fertility cult worship like the women of Moab? (See Numbers 25.) Or, both?

12. In Genesis 24 and again in Genesis 28, Abraham and, later, Isaac while living in the land of Canaan arranged for their sons to get wives from their home country rather than take wives from the pagan, fertility-cult-worshipping Canaanites. Moses gave very strict instructions about marrying such women.

**Deuteronomy 7:3-4:** [Moses related God's words:]<sup>3</sup> "Do not marry any of them, and do not let your children marry any of them,<sup>4</sup> because then they would lead your children away from the LORD to worship other gods. If that happens, the LORD will be angry with you and destroy you at once."—*Good News Bible*.\*†

13. It is clear that what these men were doing in Ezra and Nehemiah's day was in direct defiance of God's directions.
14. But, we need to remember that Moses married Zipporah, a Midianite woman. However, clearly, she had chosen to join Moses in his worship of the true God. Remember, she was the daughter of a faithful, God-serving father and family. So, these commands were not about marrying someone from a different nationality; **they were about accepting into one's family someone with different religious practices including idolatry and fertility cult worship if they continued those heathen practices.**
15. Would you agree that the Bible gives us directions for living our lives that will lead to maximum happiness? Does the command not to be unequally yoked with an unbeliever help to maintain our happiness?
16. After reviewing what Ezra and Nehemiah did to those who were practicing idolatry and had married Jewish men, do you think the Pharisees felt that their religion maximized their happiness and that they were authorized in dealing very harshly with anyone who did not do what they told them to do?
17. Read Ezra 9. When Ezra heard about all the men who had rebelled against God's directions and had married foreign women who were still idolaters, he tore his clothes in despair, tore out his hair and his beard, and sat down in grief. He sat for a long period of time in mourning with torn clothes. Other people gathered around him in sympathy. When the time came for the evening sacrifice, he got up and went in and knelt before God in prayer. His prayer resembled in some ways the prayer of Daniel recorded in Daniel 9. He recalled the terrible sins that had led them into captivity in the past, and then, he wondered if it was really possible that people were going back to those same evil practices. He even stated in Ezra 9:13: "We know that you, our God, have punished us less than we deserve and have allowed us to survive."—*Good News Bible*.\*
18. The word used in this passage about separating from foreigners is also used in Leviticus 10:10; 11:47; Exodus 26:33; Genesis 1:4,6-7,14,18. In these passages, it is very clear that the word means to be separate and absolutely distinct, even opposite. There is no question about the fact that God intended for there to be a broad and unchanging barrier between His true worshipers and idolaters.
19. It is important to notice that the people themselves were the ones who approached Ezra to discuss the issue of intermarriage. It is disturbing to realize that it was the civil leaders who brought this news to Ezra because the spiritual leaders, the priests and Levites, were perhaps the ones most guilty of this transgression! Is this a problem for pastors today?

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*\* 620.1.†

20. God intends for us to stay away from false religions. What would that imply in our day? What are the idols that people worship in our day? It might seem that no one in our day is truly worshipping an idol. But, notice these words. We each worship our own *mental image of God*.

**Multitudes have a wrong conception of God and His attributes, and are as truly serving a false god as were the worshipers of Baal.** Many even of those who claim to be Christians have allied themselves with influences that are unalterably opposed to God and [178] His truth. Thus they are led to turn away from the divine and to exalt the human.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*\* 177.1-178.0.†

21. Do we sometimes allow “fertility cult” movies to come into our homes via television? Or, the Internet? If your picture of God hasn't grown in the last year, you are worshipping an idol.
22. Read Ezra 10. In this chapter we find what Ezra and the civil leaders of the country did to deal with the people who had married foreign wives. When they were called together, all the people of Judah except four agreed to follow the directions suggested by Ezra under the guidance of God. A long list of the names of those who agreed to send away their idolatrous wives is found in Ezra 10:18-43.
23. In our day, it might seem cruel for someone to send away his wife, especially if they had children. But, we need to remember that those children were being educated and raised by the wives as shown by the fact that many of them could not even speak Hebrew or Aramaic, and thus, had no experience with the worship of *Yahweh*.
24. Review again Ezra 10:11,19. The specific word used for *separate yourself (badal)* and *put away (yatza)* are not used for *divorce* anywhere else in Scripture.
25. Thus, we can see that it was not Ezra's intent to cause divorces in legitimate marriages. Because these marriages were not established according to biblical principles, Ezra and his associates considered them to be invalid marriages in the first place, i.e., they were annulled.
26. Do we know what happened to those wives and their children? According to the customs of the day, they would have been sent back to the wife's parents home. We do know that some of those Jewish men, once again, later, began to marry unbelievers. We learn about that in the story at the end of the book of Nehemiah. Were these men really raising their children?
27. Why do we as human beings seem to go up and down in recurring cycles in so many different aspects of our lives?
28. What should we learn for our day from these biblical stories about marriage?

**1 Corinthians 7:10-17:** <sup>10</sup> For married people I have a command which is not my own but the Lord's: a wife must not leave her husband; <sup>11</sup>but if she does, she must remain single or else be reconciled to her husband; and a husband must not divorce his wife.

<sup>12</sup> To the others I say (I, myself, not the Lord): if a Christian man has a wife who is an unbeliever and she agrees to go on living with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup>And if a Christian woman is married to a man who is an unbeliever and he agrees to go on living with her, she must not divorce him. <sup>14</sup>For the

unbelieving husband is made acceptable to God by being united to his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made acceptable to God by being united to her Christian husband. If this were not so, their children would be like pagan children; but as it is, they are acceptable to God. <sup>15</sup>However, if the one who is not a believer wishes to leave the Christian partner, let it be so. In such cases the Christian partner, whether husband or wife, is free to act. God has called you to live in peace. <sup>16</sup>How can you be sure, Christian wife, that you will not save your husband? Or how can you be sure, Christian husband, that you will not save your wife?

<sup>17</sup> Each of you should go on living according to the Lord's gift to you, and as you were when God called you. This is the rule I teach in all the churches.—*Good News Bible*.\*

29. It seems quite clear from the actual experiences that we have recorded in Scripture that Ezra and, later, Nehemiah considered these separations to be singular events that were intended to prevent a syncretism—mixing of worship of the true God with paganism. They felt that the future worship of the true God was at risk.
30. It is interesting to notice that contemporary with these experiences of Ezra and Nehemiah, there was an island located in the southern part of the Nile River at a place called Elephantine where a group of Jews lived while working for the Persian government. At that site Jewish men were marrying pagan women, and they developed a mixed kind of religion in which they worshiped *Yahweh* along with His “pagan consort” the goddess Anat!

Anat was a goddess of fertility, sexual love, hunting and war, and as such was rather a paradoxical deity. She was considered to be the mother of the gods, but was also known as “the Virgin”. She was sometimes known as “the Wanton” (because of her lust for sex and war), the Fairest daughter-sister of Baal, “the Lady”, “the Destroyer”, “Strength of Life”, and “the Lady of the Mountain”. She also had a number of epithets which seem to have been peculiarly Egyptian, most notably “Anat-her” (“Agreeable Anat”), “Herit-Anta” (“Terror of Anat”) and around Elephantine (first nome of Upper Egypt) the hebrew “Beth-El” (“House of God”).—<https://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/anat/> [Retrieved on September 15, 2019].<sup>‡</sup>

31. So, it is true that while God warns against the possible pitfalls of marrying unbelievers, He is very gracious to those who do and has clear guidelines as mentioned above. In such cases, God never abandons any of His children unless they are running away from Him as fast they can go, insisting on leaving Him; then, He gives them freedom of choice.

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*\* 676.2.

32. Do you think these Jewish men who chose pagan wives were truly committed to worshipping the true God of the Jews? Or, did they marry these foreign women because they already had leanings in that direction against God? Did these experiences from Ezra and Nehemiah truly change them? While their behavior may have been changed for awhile, was there a real change within? Shouldn't those men just have been deported with their wives and children

and expelled from the country of Judah?

33. What steps can we take today to help those who are in our churches but who are married to unbelievers? Could we try to include them in some important ways? Does the cultural situation in which we live affect how we should deal with this kind of situation?
34. It is interesting to notice that Ezra 9:3 says that when Ezra heard about this intermarriage with foreigners, he tore his clothes and tore hair out from his head and his beard. Some years later when Nehemiah discovered that it had happened again, he tore out the hair and beards of those who had committed the crimes! (Nehemiah 13:23-25) Why do you think there was that difference? Does that tell us something about the character of Ezra versus that of Nehemiah? Or, does that tell us about the fact that Ezra was a priest and Nehemiah was a governor?
35. Nehemiah was very blunt in comparing their experiences with the experiences of Solomon. He explained to them that their choices would either lead toward God or away from Him. (See Romans 14:23.)
36. Considering the fact that Ezra and Nehemiah were trying to reestablish a valid and vital new government in the land of Canaan, it was particularly important that gross sins such as intermarrying with those idolaters be stopped as soon as possible. Compare the experience of the children of Israel camped on the plain of Moab across from Jericho before entering the promised land when the fertility-cult-worshiping Moabite women showed up. (Numbers 25)
37. Nehemiah had gone back to serve the emperor of Persia after spending about 12 years in Judah. We are not sure how long he was back in Persia; but, then he returned to Judah, once again. It was at that time that he discovered what had taken place.
38. How should we respond when even church leaders are not wholeheartedly following God? Playing with fire produces only fire!
39. Should pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in our day deal with sins in the way Ezra and Nehemiah did in their day? Did that harsh treatment justify the Pharisees in their behavior in the days of Jesus?
40. Clearly, right through Scripture, we are advised to be careful, thoughtful, and prayerful in choosing the ones we marry. Reverence for God and respect for His Word should be uppermost in our thoughts on such occasions.
41. Read Numbers 12:1-16. Notice how God felt about Moses and his marriage to a non-Jewish wife? Clearly, Zipporah had no intention of hanging onto some old idolatrous worship practices. Just as in the case of Ruth and Boaz, these women chose to join their husbands in the worship of the true God and were respected by God and welcomed into the family of the Jewish people without any questions being raised. In fact, God defended Moses's marriage very bluntly! Ruth ended up in the genealogy of David and Jesus!
42. So, what should we learn from these experiences of Ezra and Nehemiah? To experience the blessings that God wants to give us, we need to humbly accept His guidance in everything that we do. Is there anything in your life that you need to talk over with God? Should we humbly tremble before God's Word? How can we rededicate our lives as individuals and as churches to the truth about God? Does it help to have an accountable partner as we seek ways to bring about such changes?

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