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**Day 280 - October 7**

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## **Period of Restoration (535-425 BCE)**

### ***Problem of Intermarriage***

**Readings: *Ezra 9:1-10:44***

### ***Reflections:***

- Ezra 9 and 10 represents a very challenging passage of Scripture. Ezra comes into the local Israelite community that has fully intermarried with foreign wives as we saw with Malachi. Malachi had declared that God did not want the Israelites to divorce their wives and lead to the injustice of women and their children not being cared for under Torah Law. In these two chapters we see Ezra, God's leader, direct the men of Israel to divorce and send away all of their foreign wives and children. Now God has a concern for the vulnerable, the weak and the alien in their midst. We saw in the story of Ruth and Rahab the prostitute that God has a heart of compassion for the Gentile women. So how do we understand this decision of Ezra? First, we may be tempted to say that God didn't command this and so this may be the ramifications of Ezra living by the letter of the Law. This then would be an example of the kind of hypocrisy that we fall into when we live by the letter of the law, even God's law. Second, this may have been God's direction through Ezra (as it appears to be understood in the text) because this was a drastic measure needed to protect this remnant from falling into complete idolatry again and the evils associated with that kind of worship (human sacrifice and sexual orgies). Third, it may be a combination of the two. In either case, we must understand that this is yet another example from the story of "what doesn't work" that makes us so grateful that we no longer live under law but have a new way of living in following Christ.
- Regardless of what might be the best way to understand this part of Ezra's story, there is a transferrable principle for the reader: We must see our covenant relationship to God superseding all other covenants. We must ask whether our committed relationships are moving us towards God or moving us away from God's purposes for our lives. Jesus makes it clear that anyone who would come after him must place in the second position all other relationships, including parents, spouse and children (see Luke 14:25-33). Giving to Christ our ultimate loyalty will then lead us to be the most loving person to our parents, spouse and children, but it is a love that is defined by and guided by Christ (See Ephesians 5:21-6:9).
- Ezra feels a very heavy burden before God because of this crisis. Similar to the story of Job or the example of previous prophets, we see how he was completely overwhelmed by the

people's sin: "I tore my tunic, pulled my hair from my head and beard and sat down (or collapsed) appalled... I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice." This self-affliction was an externalization of how internally tortured his heart was for all of the sin of the people. Many times the prophets dramatized (see Hosea) the sins of the people so that they would see visibly the reality of their sin being played out before them. Again with the coming of Christ, the movement away from an externalized emphasis to an internalized emphasis is so liberating. No longer to leaders need to go to extreme demonstrations to attempt to motivate change. Now we can see God move people's hearts toward change and leaders don't need to rant or self-abase or shock people to change. God's Spirit is now trusted to do the work. Again, praise God for Jesus, especially if you are a leader!

- We see in Ezra's prayer his own basic self-awareness of the meta-narrative of Israel's story: "But now, for a brief moment, the Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives us light to our eyes (a picture of hope) and a little relief from our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem." We see in this passage the clear awareness that God had chosen Israel because their identity was the poorest of the poor, slaves to greater powers. We also see that Ezra understands the very temporal nature of their secure place. The vision of God rebuilding the temple and restoring a remnant was furthering the purposes of God and yet Ezra is firmly aware of their past failures. Ezra goes on to tell the story of Israel, the call of God on their nation and their complete failure. The remnant was a sign of God's righteousness but they really had no basis for confidence before God because of their constant failure as a nation: "Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."
- This prayer leads into another weeping, mourning hysteria: "...Ezra was praying, confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God..." Everyone joins in weeping with him. This leads one of his leaders, Shecaniah, coming up with the idea to get rid of all the foreign wives and their children. This is cast as Ezra living out the counsel of the Torah. "Let it be done according to the Law. Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it." Ezra continues to mourn, they call an assembly, all the men fully agree that their intermarriage was sin before God, and the community organizes itself to review the marriages and oversee the divorce process. The record includes a list of all the priests that divorces foreign wives, even those who were sent away with children. Again, we don't need to justify this as an act of God. There is no direct comment by God on this decision, although it appears to be under God's blessing as was the killing spree during the time of Esther. This reminds us again that the story of "what doesn't work" is a sad story filled with pain and hypocrisy where the story of "what does work" reveals the ultimate heart of God through the life and teachings of Jesus.