

Bi235 Old Testament 2

Lesson Bi235-42 Ezra and Religious Reform

Something was still missing. After Nehemiah became governor of Judah, he supervised the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Fifty years earlier the temple had been restored. With the protection of the walls and gates, Jewish people started to move back to the city and build houses. But something else was lacking.

Ezra was a Jewish man who held high position in the Persian government. He lived at the same time as Nehemiah. The king sent him to Judah to lead religious reforms. He brought gifts for the temple from the king and from Jewish exiles in Persia. He had authority from the king to make appointments within Judah. Many exiles returned with him to Judah—a journey of four months.

Ezra was a priest and a scholar. He had studied the Jewish Scriptures and lived carefully in accordance with Scripture. The Persian king wanted the people in Judah to remain his peaceful subjects. So, he sent Ezra to unite the people in their worship of God. He thought this was a good way to promote social stability and happiness among the Judean people. He was afraid of offending the God of Israel. He knew stories about how God had punished kings and nations in the past, for mistreating his people.

In Judah Ezra faced a social and religious problem: Jewish men, including priests and Levites, were marrying pagan women from neighboring tribes and nations. Why was this a problem? From the time of King Solomon—500 years—non-Jewish wives had caused their husbands and families to turn away from God. Pagan practices and idols took the place of worship of the one true God, Yahweh.

When Ezra heard about these foreign marriages, he became heartbroken. He showed his grief publicly by tearing his robe, his hair, and his beard. People stared at him in his grief. He sat there all day until the time of evening prayers. Then, on his knees, he lifted his hands and cried out to God: “I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. Our sins in the past led to sword and captivity, pillage and humiliation at the hands of our enemies.”

“Now, you, O LORD, have left us a small remnant. We have a temple again and city walls. But we have forsaken the command ‘to not give our daughters in marriage or take their daughters for our sons.’ You commanded us not to make treaties with them, because treaties required us to acknowledge their pagan gods” (Ezra 9:1-12).

Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down in front of the temple of God. A large crowd—men, women, and children—gathered and wept bitterly, as well. One of the men said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. Today we commit ourselves to send away all these foreign women and their children. Stand up, Ezra, you can take charge of this matter.”

Ezra led the people nearby in taking an oath. He was still heartbroken about the sinfulness of the people. Then he sent a proclamation throughout the land. All the exiles were summoned to appear before him in Jerusalem within three days. They came to Jerusalem, but were not happy about it. They sat in the rain and listened to Ezra: “You have been unfaithful; you have married

foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now honor the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives."

The people gathered there said, "You are right! We must do as you say." Ezra and the leaders set up a procedure to investigate these foreign marriages, family by family, and case by case. In two months, the process was complete (Ezra 10:2-17).

A great revival of faithfulness to God swept the nation. People assembled to hear Ezra read and explain the Law of Moses. He stood on a high platform built for the occasion, and read aloud from daybreak until noon. All the people listened carefully. Then Levites, who also could read and understand the Law, spoke to smaller groups of people. They read the Scripture and explained it so that people understood what was being read.

Later that day Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher, and the Levites said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep any longer." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of Scripture. "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to others who have nothing prepared. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh 8:9-10). The people went away happy and shared food and drink with one another.

Ezra continued to teach the Scriptures during the next weeks and months. They learned that Moses had commanded the people to celebrate the years of wandering in the wilderness with a feast called 'Booths.' Each family built a temporary booth or hut out of branches, and they lived in them for seven days. Ezra read aloud for the seven days of the Feast of Booths. On the eighth day the people gathered together to confess their sins. They heard the long story of their history—how God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, given them the Law through Moses, and led them during 40 years of camping in the wilderness.

They learned about repeated cycles of unfaithfulness. Their ancestors became arrogant and turned away from God. Then God punished them by allowing foreign nations to oppress them. Because of oppression and suffering, the people turned back to God and repented. Then God forgave the nation and sent deliverers to rescue them from their enemies. This happened over and over again.

The people were inspired by the Scriptures to make an agreement before the LORD—a covenant to follow the Law of Moses and to obey all the commands of the LORD. They promised to honor the Sabbath Day and Sabbath Year. Every seven years was a Sabbath Year; they would allow some of their fields to remain fallow and they would cancel all debts. They also promised to support all the needs of the temple, and to share all its expenses.

The price of spiritual power is obedience to the word of God. King Josiah discovered the scrolls of Scripture, and began a great revival in Judah. Years later, Ezra taught the Scripture to the remnant of God's people, and they repented. The longest psalm in the Bible—Psalm 119—is all about the power and importance of the word of God. Psalm 119:7-10: "The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.... They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey; than honey from the honeycomb."

This story is **important** because the returning exiles needed to restore the proper worship of God. Ezra and the Levites taught the Scripture to the people, and the people responded by repenting.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that rebuilding the temple and rebuilding the walls were important. But rebuilding faithful worship of God was equally important. The future of the people of God depended on their return to godly worship and godly behavior.

Let's **review** this lesson—

1. Why was intermarriage a problem among the returning exiles? [Pause]
A. If you said, "Intermarriage brought pagan beliefs and practices into Israelite families, and was forbidden by God," you are correct.
2. How did Ezra and the Levites encourage religious revival in Judah? [Pause]
A. If you said, "They fasted, and prayed, and taught the word of God to the people," you are right.
3. What was the Feast of Booths and why was it important? [Pause]
A. If you said, "For seven days in the fall, Israelites built temporary huts or shelters and lived in them. Moses started this practice to remind Israelites that their ancestors camped in temporary shelters during the years of wilderness wanderings, and God provided for them during those years," you are correct.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to it at least three times. As you hear the story each time, imagine how it happened. See the events in your own mind. Then tell someone else the story in your own words as you remember it.

Crowds and buildings may look like churches, but is that all church is about? Teaching people to know God, to know his Word, and to worship him are the foundation of a church. Ask yourself: "What am I building? What am I teaching? Am I trying to do this by myself?" Pray that God will help you to build up and equip the people of God—your part of his Body.