

NOON BIBLE STUDY: EZRA 9-10

THIS WEEK WE CONCLUDE THE BOOK OF EZRA BUT NOT THE STORY OF EZRA (THAT WILL CONTINUE IN NEHEMIAH). WE HAVE READ PREVIOUS THAT EZRA HAS ARRIVED AT JERUSALEM WITH HIS GROUP OF EXILES, PRIESTS AND LEVITES. HIS PURPOSE FOR RETURNING WAS EXPLAINED IN CHAPTER 7:

EZRA 7:10 - FOR EZRA HAD SET HIS HEART TO STUDY THE LAW OF THE LORD AND TO PRACTICE IT, AND TO TEACH HIS STATUTES AND ORDINANCES IN ISRAEL.

EZRA WILL DISCOVER SOMETHING ISN'T RIGHT IN THE LAND AND WILL LEAD A TIME OF GREAT NATIONAL REPENTANCE. THIS WILL BE A DIFFICULT MOMENT FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD, BUT THEIR CHOICE TO RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD (OR NOT) WILL DETERMINE THE FUTURE OF THEIR VERY EXISTENCE. AND SO WE BEGIN...

EZRA 9:1-4 - THE HOLY RACE DEFILED

WHAT A WELCOME FOR EZRA! HE DOESN'T GET MUCH TIME TO SETTLE IN FOR HE IS QUICKLY CONFRONTED WITH A SERIOUS PROBLEM AMONGST THE PEOPLE.

IN THE LAST CHAPTERS WE HIGHLIGHTED THE MISSION OF EZRA AND HOW IMPORTANT IT WAS FOR THE WORD OF GOD TO BE TAUGHT TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD. THIS CONFIRMS THE REASON WHY. THROUGH OUR JOURNEY THROUGH EZRA, WE HAVE LEARNED THAT THE ALTAR WAS REBUILT, THE TEMPLE RECONSTRUCTED AND THE WORSHIP OF THE LORD HAS RESUMED. BUT AT THE SAME TIME THE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN LIVING UNHOLY LIVES, SPECIFICALLY INTER-MARRYING WITH THE NATIONS AROUND THEM. WHILE THIS MAY NOT SEEM SIGNIFICANT FOR US AS MULTI-ETHNIC CHRISTIANS LIVING IN THE MELTING POT OF AMERICA, AT THIS TIME IN THE REDEMPTION HISTORY IT WAS. VERSE 2 SUMMARIZES:

EZRA 9:2 - "FOR THEY HAVE TAKEN SOME OF THEIR DAUGHTERS AS WIVES FOR THEMSELVES AND FOR THEIR SONS, SO THAT THE HOLY RACE HAS INTERMINGLED WITH THE PEOPLES OF THE LANDS;

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WERE CHOSEN BY GOD TO BE HIS SPECIAL PEOPLE ON THE EARTH. THEY WERE THE BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM, THE FATHER OF FAITH WHO THE LORD SPECIFICALLY CALLED. THEY WERE THE OTHER PARTY TO GOD'S COVENANTS. THEY WERE TO BE HOLY AND SEPARATE FROM ALL OTHER NATIONS OF THE WORLD. YOU AREN'T SPECIAL IF YOU'RE JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. AND YOU AREN'T HOLY IF YOU ARE NOT SET APART FROM OTHERS AND EVIL.

BY CONTRAST, THE CURRENT PEOPLE OF GOD (CHRISTIANS, THE CHURCH) ARE MADE THROUGH FAITH IN THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. THEY ARE FROM EVERY NATION, TRIBE, AND TONGUE (REVELATION 5). THEY ARE JEWISH OR GENTILE (ROMANS 10:12, COLOSSIANS 3:11). THEY ARE MEN AND WOMEN FROM ANY AND EVERY RACE. ALL THAT MATTERS IS FAITH. HOWEVER, DURING THE DAYS OF EZRA 9, THIS WAS NOT THE CASE AT ALL. IT WAS A VERY RARE EXCEPTION THAT SOMEONE FROM OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL WAS WELCOMED INTO THE COMMUNITY OR TURNED TO WORSHIP THE TRUE GOD. THIS TRADITION AND THE GROWTH OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN THIS DAY IS BY FAITH AND OBEDIENCE, BUT IT IS DEPENDANT ON BIOLOGY. AND THAT IS WHAT IS AT RISK IN THIS CHAPTER.

FRESH ON THE HEELS OF A 70 YEAR EXILE, THE REMNANT, THE SMALL AND FEW REMAINING BIOLOGICAL DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM ARE AT RISK OF BEING "INTERMINGLED" WITH THE NATIONS AND HAVING CHILDREN WHO ARE NOT FULLY JEWISH. THAT'S A PROBLEM.

THAT'S THE PROBLEM EZRA IS FACING. REMEMBER, EZRA IS A SKILLED SCRIBE AND PRIEST AND EXPERT IN THE LAW OF MOSES. HE WOULD HAVE KNOWN:

EXODUS 34:12, 16 - "WATCH YOURSELF THAT YOU MAKE NO COVENANT WITH THE INHABITANTS OF THE LAND INTO WHICH YOU ARE GOING, OR IT WILL BECOME A SNARE IN YOUR MIDST...(INSTEAD DESTROY THEM AND THEIR GODS OR ELSE) ... 16 YOU MIGHT TAKE SOME OF HIS DAUGHTERS FOR YOUR SONS, AND HIS DAUGHTERS MIGHT PLAY THE HARLOT WITH THEIR GODS AND CAUSE YOUR SONS ALSO TO PLAY THE HARLOT WITH THEIR GODS.

DEUTERONOMY 7:1-4 - "WHEN THE LORD YOUR GOD BRINGS YOU INTO THE LAND WHERE YOU ARE ENTERING TO POSSESS IT, AND CLEARS AWAY MANY NATIONS BEFORE YOU, THE HITTITES AND THE GIRGASHITES AND THE AMORITES AND THE CANAANITES AND THE PERIZZITES AND THE HIVITES AND THE JEBUSITES, SEVEN NATIONS GREATER AND STRONGER THAN YOU, 2 AND WHEN THE LORD YOUR GOD DELIVERS THEM BEFORE YOU AND YOU DEFEAT THEM, THEN YOU SHALL UTTERLY DESTROY THEM. YOU SHALL MAKE NO COVENANT WITH THEM AND SHOW NO FAVOR TO THEM. 3 "FURTHERMORE, YOU SHALL NOT INTERMARRY WITH THEM; YOU SHALL NOT GIVE YOUR DAUGHTERS TO THEIR SONS, NOR SHALL YOU TAKE THEIR DAUGHTERS FOR YOUR SONS. 4 "FOR THEY WILL TURN YOUR SONS AWAY FROM FOLLOWING ME TO SERVE OTHER GODS; THEN THE ANGER OF THE LORD WILL BE KINDLED AGAINST YOU AND HE WILL QUICKLY DESTROY YOU.

NO WONDER EZRA "TEARS HIS GARMENT AND ROBE, PULLS HIS HAIR FROM HIS HEAD AND SAT DOWN APPALLED" (V. 3).

EZRA 9:5-15 - EZRA'S PRAYER

EZRA RECOUNTS THE LORD'S FAITHFULNESS TO THE PEOPLE AND ALSO REMEMBERS HOW THE NATION HAS OFTEN TURNED AWAY FROM THE LORD AND HIS COMMANDS AND FACED THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR SIN. HE PLEADS THAT AFTER ALL OF GOD'S MERCY SO FAR, THIS GENERATION WOULD NOT TURN AWAY YET AGAIN.

V. 12 - EZRA QUOTES THE COMMANDS FORBIDDING INTERMARRIAGE (EXODUS 34 & DEUTERONOMY 7)

EZRA 10:1-4 - REPENTANCE BEGINS

EZRA'S PUBLIC CONFESSION AND MOURNING BEFORE THE TEMPLE INSPIRES A "VERY LARGE ASSEMBLY" TO FORM. THE PEOPLE JOIN EZRA IN HIS SORROW AND ACTUALLY ARE MOVED TO TAKE STEPS OF REPENTANCE. A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PEOPLE NAMED SHECANIAH ENCOURAGES A COVENANT TO BE MADE BETWEEN GOD AND THE PEOPLE IN ORDER TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT WITH THE LORD. HE PLEADS WITH EZRA TO GIVE THEM WISDOM AND DIRECTION ON WHAT TO DO (V. 4)

HERE IS AN INTERESTING TEXTUAL NOTE ON THE ENGLISH WORD "MARRIAGE" IN VERSE 2 THAT MIGHT HELP US UNDERSTAND WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE.

"MARRIED" - THE WORD TRANSLATED MARRIED IS NOT THE USUAL ONE, BUT MEANS LITERALLY "WE HAVE GIVEN A HOME"; SHECANIAH'S WORDS MAY IMPLY THAT THESE ILLICIT RELATIONSHIPS WERE NOT MARRIAGES IN THE FULL SENSE. (ESV STUDY BIBLE, EZRA 10:2)

MAYBE THEY WERE OFFICIALLY MARRIED, MAYBE THEY WERE JUST COHABITATING. EITHER WAY, THE NATION HAS ENTERED INTO UNSANCTIONED AND UNHOLY RELATIONSHIPS.

EZRA 10:5-8 - EZRA AND THE ELDERS MAKE A PLAN

EZRA GATHERS WITH THE LEADING PRIESTS AND LEVITES, WHILE FASTING, TO MAKE AN OFFICIAL PLAN AND PROCLAIM THIS PLAN TO THE NATION. WORD IS SENT TO THE EXILES AND THEY ARE ALL URGED TO GATHER IN JERUSALEM. ANY THAT WILL NOT COME WILL BE ASSUMED DO NOT WANT REPENTANCE AND WILL BE EXCOMMUNICATED.

EZRA 10:9-11 - EZRA'S CHARGE TO THE PEOPLE

THE NATION GATHERS AND EZRA CALLS THEM TO REPENTANCE. HE SPECIFICALLY NAMES THE SIN THEY HAVE COMMITTED (V. 10) AND CALLS THEM TO SPECIFIC REPENTANCE IN LIGHT OF THEIR SIN. IN THIS CASE IT IS TO "MAKE CONFESSION TO THE LORD, DO HIS WILL, SEPARATE THEMSELVES FROM THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND AND FROM THEIR FOREIGN WIVES." (V 11)

WHAT A MOMENT! THE CONVICTING CHARGE GIVEN BY THE SPIRITUAL LEADER OF THE PEOPLE (EZRA) AND THE ENTIRE NATION GATHERED AT THE HOUSE OF THE LORD IN THE POURING HEAVY RAIN. CAN'T YOU JUST IMAGINE THIS SCENE?!

EZRA 10:12-17 - THE PEOPLE RESPOND

THERE IS GENERAL AGREEMENT TO RESPOND TO EZRA'S CALL. HOWEVER, THE PEOPLE ADMIT THAT THIS COURSE OF ACTION IS NOT SOMETHING THAT CAN JUST BE DONE IN ONE DAY. (AND BESIDES, IT'S POURING RAIN AND WE CAN'T STAY OUT HERE MUCH LONGER). THESE WERE COMPLICATED SINS AND WHILE THERE WAS A ZEAL TO OBEY SWIFTLY, THEY RECOGNIZED THERE WAS SOME UNTANGLING THAT NEEDED TO BE DONE. AND SO THE PEOPLE WILL RETURN AND SUBMIT TO REGIONAL LEADERS WHO WOULD ENSURE THE REPENTANCE WAS DONE IN A TIMELY MANNER. THE ENTIRE PROCESS TOOK ABOUT 3 MONTHS.

EZRA 10:16B-17 (NLT) - ON DECEMBER 29, THE LEADERS SAT DOWN TO INVESTIGATE THE MATTER. BY MARCH 27, THE FIRST DAY OF THE NEW YEAR, THEY HAD FINISHED DEALING WITH ALL THE MEN WHO HAD MARRIED PAGAN WIVES.

EZRA 10:18-24 - NAMING NAMES

EZRA RECORDED THE NAMES OF THE MEN WHO HAD COMMITTED THESE SINS. OUCH. THIS FIRST GROUPING OF MEN WERE FROM THE PRIESTS, LEVITES AND TEMPLE SINGERS. THERE WAS EVEN GUILT AMONGST THE SONS OF THE FORMER HIGH PRIEST JESHUA THE SON OF JOZADAK (ONE OF OUR HEROS FROM THE EARLY CHAPTERS OF EZRA). THE MEN PLEDGED TO "PUT AWAY THEIR WIVES" AND OFFERED A SACRIFICE FOR THEIR SIN. THIS SECTION RECORDS WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN A TREMENDOUSLY DIFFICULT AND SORROWFUL TIME FOR THE NATION.

EZRA 10:25-44 - NAMING NAMES (CONTINUED) & A SAD BUT HOLY END

THE SPECIFIC RECORDING OF THOSE WHO HAD SINNED (AND REPENTED) CONTINUES AS THE CHAPTER ENDS. WE READ 86 FROM ISRAEL, 17 PRIESTS, 6 LEVITES AND 4 TEMPLE ATTENDANTS. THE SUMMARY STATEMENT WHICH ENDS THE CHAPTER IS VERY DIFFICULT TO READ AND EVEN HARDER TO IMAGINE:

EZRA 10:44 (NIV) - ALL THESE HAD MARRIED FOREIGN WOMEN, AND SOME OF THEM HAD CHILDREN BY THESE WIVES.

THIS IS AN EXTREME ACT OF REPENTANCE BUT IT IS REPENTANCE FROM SIN NONETHELESS. THE PEOPLE HAD TURNED FROM GOD IN THEIR CHOICES AND IN THIS INSTANCE, "PUTTING THEIR WIVES AWAY" WAS WHAT REPENTANCE LOOKED LIKE. SOMETIMES THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR SIN SEEM MINOR (A BAD DAY, GETTING A LITTLE UPSET, NEEDING TO APOLOGIZE FOR AN UNKIND WORD, ETC), SOMETIMES THEY

ARE MAJOR (DISEASE, INJURY, DEATH). IN THIS CRITICAL MOMENT FOR THE FUTURE OF THE NATION, THE PEOPLE RESPOND WITH A DIFFICULT ACT SO THAT THEY CAN SURVIVE AS A PEOPLE.

AS WE CONCLUDE THIS CHAPTER, THERE IS ANOTHER TEXTUAL NOTE ABOUT THE ACT OF "PUTTING AWAY" THE FOREIGN WIVES AND CHILDREN AND A TURN TOWARDS THE LESSONS WE CAN TAKE FROM EZRA 9-10:

"AS WITH THE TERM FOR "MARRIAGE," THIS IS NOT THE USUAL EXPRESSION FOR "DIVORCE," AND MAY ALSO IMPLY THAT THESE WERE NOT PROPER MARRIAGES. THE WORD MEANS SIMPLY "BRING OUT." IN EFFECT, THIS MEANT EXCOMMUNICATING THEM FROM THE COMMUNITY OF RETURNED EXILES. THE TEXT DOES NOT MAKE CLEAR ANY OTHER DETAILS CONCERNING MATTERS OF ONGOING SUPPORT AND PROTECTION FOR THESE WIVES AND THEIR CHILDREN (V. 44), OR CONCERNING WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM. BECAUSE THIS REPRESENTS A DIFFERENT SITUATION IN A DIFFERENT CONTEXT AS COMPARED TO 1 COR. 7:12-14 (WHERE PAUL TELLS CHRISTIANS NOT TO DIVORCE THEIR UNBELIEVING SPOUSES), AND BECAUSE THIS EXAMPLE WAS RECORDED HERE IN EZRA FOR DESCRIPTIVE RATHER THAN NORMATIVE REASONS, THERE WOULD BE NO JUSTIFICATION FOR ANYONE TO TAKE SIMILAR ACTIONS TODAY. (ESV STUDY BIBLE, EZRA 10:3)

(ADDITIONAL SIDE NOTE: SOME COMMENTATORS SUGGEST THAT THE EXTENSIVE NATURE OF THE INVESTIGATION (V.16-17) INDICATES THAT EACH CASE WAS LOOKED AT ON ITS OWN. WE KNOW FROM EZRA 6:21 THAT THERE WAS A PROVISION FOR THOSE OF THE LAND WHO CONVERTED TO THE WORSHIP OF THE LORD TO REMAIN A PART OF THE PEOPLE. ALSO, IT WAS LIKELY THAT THESE FOREIGNERS RETURNED TO THEIR FOREIGN FAMILIES (RATHER THAN JUST DROPPED ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD).

A FEW MORE FINAL THINGS FOR US TO CONSIDER:

THE THEOLOGICAL TAKEAWAY FROM THIS ACCOUNT IS NOT TO VALIDATE DIVORCE. THE THEOLOGICAL TAKEAWAY IS THAT SOMETIMES THERE ARE MOMENTS WHERE EXTREME ACTIONS ARE TAKEN AND CALLED FOR BY GOD TO ENSURE THE FUTURE OF HIS PEOPLE. TO LOOK AT THIS HEARTBREAKING RECORD IN ISOLATION COULD LEAVE ONE QUESTIONING THE CHARACTER AND HEART OF GOD HIMSELF - HE SEEMS NARROW-MINDED, VENGEFUL OR UNLOVING SOME MIGHT SAY. BUT THIS RECORD, THOUGH HARD TO READ, IS NOT THE LONE PICTURE OR DEFINING MOMENT OF GOD'S NATURE.

HOWEVER, IT DOES SPEAKS TO THE IMPORTANCE OF WISE COUNSEL AND SPIRITUAL DECISION-MAKING IN LIGHT OF MARRIAGE. WHILE THOSE WHO CONVERT TO CHRISTIANITY AFTER MARRIAGE HAVE CERTAIN CHALLENGES, A CHRISTIAN SHOULD NOT CONSIDER MARRYING SOMEONE WHO IS NOT A CHRIST-FOLLOWER. NOT ONLY DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT SPECIFICALLY FORBID THIS (2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-18), IT IS UNWISE ON A NUMBER OF PRACTICAL LEVELS.

LASTLY, THIS RECORD REMINDS US YET AGAIN ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WORD OF GOD. WHILE GOD WORKS THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT TO ILLUMINATE THE TRUTH OF SCRIPTURE, THE SCRIPTURE'S PURPOSE IS TO GIVE US AN EXACT RECORDING OF WHAT GOD WANTS US TO DO/NOT DO, BE AND NOT BE. IF WE DO NOT HOLD THE TESTIMONY OF THE BIBLE AS OUR STANDARD, WE MAY HAVE THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE OF "RELIGION" BUT BE MISSING THE MARK OF WHAT GOD IS ACTUALLY LOOKING FOR. IN FACT, OUR RELIGIOUS DEVOTION AND PRACTICES OFTEN ARE WHAT GET IN THE WAY OF THE TRUE HEART OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS. REMEMBER THE NATION REGATHERED TO JERUSALEM WERE MAKING THE SACRIFICES AND CELEBRATING THE FEASTS, BUT THEY WERE INTERMARRYING - SOMETHING STRICTLY FORBIDDEN BY THE LAW/WORD OF GOD. WE TOO MUST BE CAREFUL TO GO BEYOND WHAT THE TIMELESS SCRIPTURES INSTRUCT. ARE WE DOING WHAT WE "THINK" GOD WANTS US TO BE DOING - OR ARE WE DOING WHAT WE KNOW GOD WANTS US TO BE DOING BECAUSE WE HAVE HEARD AND READ HIS WORD?

LUNCH SIGN UP?
NEXT WEEK???