

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

Purifying The People

January 15th, 2012

Ezra 9-10

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Ezra chapter 7. I told you two weeks ago that the story of Ezra/Nehemiah/Esther takes place over a time period of about 100 years in three major narrative blocks. Last week we told the story of the first block under Zerubbabel and Joshua and this week we are going to look at the story of the middle block under Ezra. At the end of last week's message we saw the temple dedicated and the people celebrating the faithfulness of God to his promises. It had been 70 years since the fall of the old temple and now here it was 70 years later and the new temple was dedicated, just like God had said. Chapter 6 ends then in the year 516 B.C. There is a 58 year break in the story between the end of chapter 6 and the start of chapter 7. Chapter 7 begins in the reign of Artaxerxes, so we find ourselves shot forward through history to the year 458 B.C. In verse 6 of chapter 7 we meet the main character in this middle phase of the reformation story.

⁶this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him. (Ezra 7:6. NKJV)

In verse 10 we are told more about him:

¹⁰For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. (Ezra 7:10. NKJV)

Ezra was not a Bible Geek with integrity. He lived out that which he saw in Holy Scripture.

Listen to what one scholar says about Ezra:

He is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. (Derek Kidner, Ezra & Nehemiah. Leicester: IV Press, 1979, 62.)

That is the standard, humanly speaking, for any man of God who would stand in the pulpit of God's church. So Ezra the intuitive, studious, self-disciplined reformer scribe is commissioned by the King to go to the land of Israel, recently resettled and teach them the laws of God. He doesn't go by himself, instead he begins to recruit a team. He goes to the heads of the major family groupings and he begins to put the call out. They gather the initial group at the River Ahava and he takes a head count and he realises that he doesn't have many Levites. That's in chapter 8:15ff. Now, you have to put this in context here. These people have been living in Babylon for 130 years now. They may be Levites but they haven't been sacrificing goats recently. They've been shopkeepers, lawyers, teachers, business men and they've built a good life for themselves and they've essentially forgotten that they were at one time in ministry. And so why would they want to leave all of that and sanctify themselves again to a life of religious service? Why would they want to live on less money, live by a more rigorous moral code and have no fixed address – rotating through the tribes and villages teaching the law of God? There is no good human reason. But Ezra puts the call out and the Holy Spirit summons a few good men. Ezra is building a team of highly committed, highly invested people. That is how you begin to turn a revival into a reformation.

At 8:21 we begin to see the narrative of the journey. This wasn't like walking from Orillia to Atherly. It was like walking from Orillia to Kenora. This was 1000 miles. This was 1600 km. And they were not travelling light. The Bible says that Artaxerxes sent them off with enormous sums of money. 8:24 says for example that they were packing 650 talents of silver and 100 talents of gold among other things. To put that in perspective, a talent weighed 30 kgs. So this is 3000 kg of gold and almost 20000 kg of silver. This is a convoy of dozens of mule carts loaded

to the hilt with heavy metals. This is a nation building gift from Artaxerxes. And they are carting it bodily from Orillia to Kenora. They faced constant attacks from bandits and thieves. This was a target of unimaginable value. Let me put this in perspective. There are 32.15 troy ounces in 1 kg of gold. At today's prices that means that the gold alone had a market value of \$150,000,000. Just the gold. This is a NATION BUILDING GIFT. And they are carrying it to Kenora. It takes them more than four months. They arrive, they transfer the money and Ezra starts preaching the Bible. He preaches for 5 months. And then look what happens, we pick up the story in 9:1:

¹When these things were done, **the leaders came to me**, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

²For they have taken some of their daughters *as wives* for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of *those* lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass." (Ezra 9:1-2. NKJV)

Notice that it doesn't say that Ezra went to them. It doesn't say that Ezra led a witch hunt. It doesn't say that people began turning in their neighbours. It says that THE LEADERS CAME TO HIM! The leaders began to hear the Word of God, they began to experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit and they came to HIM! Listen to me church, when the Word of God is preached it ALWAYS produces moral upheaval. You find yourself convicted about things that didn't use to bother you, but now, now they break your heart. I've had people say that they don't like our church because it makes them feel guilty. Listen to me friends, it is not this church, it is not the people here, it isn't even the pastor here, IT IS THE WORD OF GOD AND THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT!!! When you hear the Word of God the Holy Spirit takes that word and drives it like a dagger into your heart and you REPENT!!! Or you harden your heart and you leave. Praise the Lord these elders didn't do that, they didn't leave, they went to Ezra and they confessed. Now look at how Ezra responds to the news:

³So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. (Ezra 9:3. NKJV)

Now some people think this was contrived that Ezra was trying to shame them or something with a big dramatic show, but these men are already shamed and it seems pretty clear that Ezra really didn't know. He didn't know this was going on and that seems incredible to us but you have to look at the numbers. The population of Jews in Israel at this time was about 60,000 and if you add up the numbers we get later in the book it seems that only about 100 people were involved in

this sin so that's like .2% of the total population. In our church that would be 1 person. This is the equivalent of me finding out that 1 person in our church has married a pagan. And when he heard this, he sat down, tore his clothes and pulled out the hair of his head and his beard. He's in total shock. Now why is that? Because he knows his history!!! What was the high water mark of the last great cycle? The reign of Solomon. Do you remember when Solomon dedicated the temple? The glory of the Lord filled the temple! The house was filled with a cloud, the priests were all slain in the Spirit and the manifest Presence of the Lord was in their midst!!! That was the high water mark!!!! But then what happened? Solomon started marrying foreign women. He was so wise he thought he was smarter than God. God had said not to marry foreign women because God knew that when a man is faced with the choice of obeying his God or obeying his wife he will choose his wife every time. Men are weak, men are visual, men think with their zippers and men forget the ultimate when the immediate whispers in their ears! But Solomon thought he was better than that and different than his father Adam. He thought that he was simply making political alliances as a way of averting war, he didn't believe that these women would have any real power over him, after all he was the smartest man in human history. Well it turns out that he was wrong. The Bible says:

¹But King Solomon loved many foreign women, ...²from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, "You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. ³And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. ⁴For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David. (1 Kings 11:1-4. NKJV)

This was the turning point in Israelite history!! One man fell in love with a foreign woman and the whole nation was destroyed and sent into exile and slavery! And now Ezra arrives in Palestine after slogging 3000 kgs of gold over 1600 kms, fighting off constant attacks from bandits and he arrives only to find that the leaders of the people are already committing the very sins that caused their destruction the last time around and he's like: "Are you KIDDING ME? 130 years of slavery? 10 tribes ANNIHILATED? And you're giving this a second go? We're marrying PAGANS again? Oh my goodness!" and he sits in the dust and plucks out his own hair in astonishment and despair. A real reformer knows his history and he takes sin seriously.

So Ezra sits down in the dust, he is frustrated, he is angry, he is astonished and he cannot believe that the people would do this to a God who had loved them so much and punished them so lightly. Look at what he says starting in 9:8:

⁸And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage.... ¹³And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us *such* deliverance as this, ¹⁴should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people *committing* these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed *us*, so that *there would be* no remnant or survivor? (Ezra 9:8-14. NKJV)

He says: “I cannot believe we have done this after all God has done, forgiving our sins and sending us hope. It is disgraceful, it is dishonouring and God would be right to wipe us off the map.” Every great reformer, I’d say even every great Christian leader cares more about the ultimate glory of God than he does about the short term peace of the people. Now look at chapter 10.

¹Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly.

²And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, *one* of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, “We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.

³Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

⁴Arise, for *this matter is your responsibility*. We also *are* with you. Be of good courage, and do *it*.”

⁵Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath. ⁷And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem (Ezra 10:1-7. NKJV)

Listen to me church because I am going to tell you something very important: reformation either dies or takes hold among the elders of the people. Ezra could have sat there in the dirt all day long and nothing would have happened. But the elders came forward and they said: “We’re with you on this Bible boy, do what you think needs to be done and we’ll back you and make the changes.” That’s how a reformation happens! You get the elders or it goes nowhere! My friends, I get WAY TOO MUCH CREDIT for the growth and change and reformation that has happened in this church. The LION’s share of the credit first must go to the Word of God. In this story the real magic was in the 5 months of preaching, before that nobody even knew they were sinning! The Word of God IS POWERFUL. PERIOD. I love how Peter says it in 1 Peter 2:

²as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby (1 Peter 2:2. NKJV)

Here the metaphor of “milk” is not in contrast to “meat” as elsewhere. Peter is simply saying that to grow you have to DESIRE the milk of the word like a baby desires its bottle. I know about this one. Babies are demanding and insistent about their milk. Noa is WILDLY persistent and totally unyielding when it comes to her milk. She is impervious to reason. I’m sitting at the dinner table, we’re trying to eat and she’s calling out: “I want my MILK NOW!! NOW!!! NOW!!!!” And I want to say to her: “Listen woman, you are 1 of 7 in this house and you need to settle down and wait your turn”. But she’s not hearing it because she wants the MILK. Peter says that we need to be like that with the Word of God. We better whine when the pastor tries to give us something else, we better raise HOLY HELL if he tries to tell us his opinions on personal finance or social media. NO SIR. THAT WILL NOT DO. WE WANT THE WORD AND WE WANT IT NOW!!! Peter says that you need to want, desire and demand the PURE MILK OF THE WORD. Because it is the Word that makes you grow. The lion’s share of credit for the growth and change in this place goes to the Word of God because it makes us grow. It is magic, it is powerful and it is the seed that the Holy Spirit works into our hearts that gives birth to fruit and life and change. That’s where revival begins. **But it dies in the womb if it is not embraced by the leaders.**

The reality is that as the pastor I have no actual authority in this place other than the authority of the pulpit. I can’t set the budget and I can’t change our policies – the board OWNS those things. So I can preach all the lovely sermons I want, I can sing from the Scriptures a song of revival but if the elders don’t DANCE then the party is over before it begins. Let me tell you something church, the reason for this growth and fruit and change in our church, humanly speaking, is that your elders are responsive to the Word of the Lord. They put the money and the policies behind the preaching and if they don’t I might as well just sit down in the dust and pull out my hair. Change begins or dies in the heart of the elders and you’ve got the best ones I’ve ever worked with.

So the elders issue a proclamation saying that there is going to be a full scale investigation into this matter and everyone has to show up so that they can get to the bottom of things. It ends up taking three months but they get the names of those who’ve married foreign wives. Ezra tells the assembly where this investigation is going to lead:

¹¹Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives.” (Ezra 10:11. NKJV)

He says: “We’re going to get to the bottom of this, you’re going to make confession, you are going to begin obeying the Lord and you are going to sever your relationships with the people around you and you are going to divorce your pagan wives.” Now look at verse 18 as they begin to publish the names of those who put away their wives:

¹⁸And among the sons of the priests who had taken pagan wives *the following* were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah. ¹⁹And they gave their promise that they would put away their wives; and *being guilty, they presented* a ram of the flock as their trespass offering. (Ezra 10:18. NKJV)

They start with the leaders! They start with priesthood! In a church that wants revival the LEADERS have to be held to the highest of standards. Sins discovered among the leadership have to be dealt with publically. This is true in the Old Testament and it is true in the New Testament. Paul says in 1 Timothy:

¹⁹Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. ²⁰Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. (1 Timothy 5:19-20. NKJV)

Paul says: “You should protect your leaders from petty accusations but if it turns out that they are sinning then they need to be rebuked publically so that the others learn to fear God.” Same principle. Now it doesn’t say in Ezra that the leaders were stripped of their authority, it just says that they had to publically repent, make restitution and set the example of godliness if they wanted to remain as leaders. The first wives to walk out of the city were the pagan wives of the priests and the elders. You better never ask your people to live a life of holiness you yourself are not prepared to live. That’s the point and that’s the story. The Bible says by way of conclusion after the list is given:

⁴⁴All these had taken pagan wives, and *some* of them had wives *by whom* they had children. (Ezra 10:44. NKJV)

Well now, we can’t exactly just close in prayer here can we? This story is massive in its impact and implications so lets just take a few minutes and wrestle through how we apply these principles today. Obviously there are several key observations we could make about leadership

from this story. We could talk about team building, we could talk about leadership breadth and diversity, we could talk about leading laterally, we could talk about not being paralysed by lack of consensus but that would be very interesting to only a small number of people in this church. We'll talk about that at Barnabas sometime. I want to draw out the applications we all need to wrestle with in this place. But first of all let me start with something that this passage does not mean to imply, for anybody:

Implications and Applications:

1. This passage does not mean to imply that divorce is a good thing

Sometimes people will read this story and they will say: "This must prove that the OT is irrelevant today because Jesus says that God hates divorce and that it is always a bad thing". Well let's slow down here. Jesus did not invent the idea that God hates divorce. There was a prophet in the Old Testament serving at this exact time named Malachi and if we read his prophecies we discover some more of what was going on here. The back story is that these people, before Ezra arrived had been divorcing their Jewish wives in order to marry younger, hotter, pagan women; that's in the Bible, look at Malachi 2:11-16:

For Judah has profaned The LORD'S holy *institution* which He loves: He has married the daughter of a foreign god.¹² May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob the man who does this, being awake and aware, yet who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!¹³ And this is the second thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive *it* with goodwill from your hands.¹⁴ Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness **between you and the wife of your youth**, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant.¹⁵ But did He not make *them* one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.¹⁶ "For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence," says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 2:11-16. NKJV)

Do you see what the Bible says? These older men were divorcing their wives when they got old and they were taking NEW YOUNG HOT WIVES from among the pagans. This is an outrage, says the prophet of the Lord. God HATES DIVORCE! So let's be clear, what Jesus says in Matthew 19 is no different than what was said then in Ezra's day. Jesus says:

⁹And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9. NKJV)

Jesus says the exact same thing in Matthew 19 that Malachi says in Ezra's day: "You have been divorcing your wives for stupid reasons that do not count in God's eyes, therefore these new relationships are nothing other than dressed up adultery." Jesus says that the only acceptable reason to divorce is if there is on-going, unrepentant sexual betrayal. So Jesus and Malachi are on the same page. Well then how then can Ezra tell a hundred people to get divorced? Listen to me very carefully. Sometimes in life situations arise that are so sinful, so convoluted, so utterly and disastrously fallen that there is no absolutely righteous way out. Harry Blamires in his book "The Christian Mind" makes that very point. Blamires was reflecting on the journey of his mentor C.S. Lewis. Lewis began his life as a Christian pacifist meaning that because he believed humans were created in the image of God, he therefore believed that the death penalty and war were always wrong. Then a once in a generation situation emerged. Hitler. A man so fallen, so depraved, so utterly and disastrously sinful that Europe went up in flames and no altogether righteous option or solution presented itself. To go to war and kill millions was horrific and yet to not go to war and allow millions to be slaughtered like cattle in concentration camps was even more horrific and so he had to concede that there are times when a Christian has to choose between the lesser of two evils. War was less bad than not war. Killing Hitler was less bad than letting him live. The Bible is a very practical book. It recognises that sometimes the utter fallenness of our society will require radical actions that please no one but that reset the community on a path of rightness and justice. These decisions are never to be made individually. In Ezra it is the community of elders under the power of the Word of God that chooses this awful course because no altogether righteous solution presented itself. This is sad, but this is real life in a fallen world. By the way they had to talk about something very similar to this in the New Testament also. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:

If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.

¹³And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

¹⁵But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such *cases*. But God has called us to peace. (1 Corinthians 7:12-15. NKJV)

Do you notice how all of the same concerns are attended to? Divorce is not to be the easy answer, the concern of God for holy children is respected and the need to walk unassaulted by contrary relationships is acknowledged. This is the same basic principle here! The only difference being that these are people who became the people of God AFTER they were married

and so the outcome is slightly different. These people were both pagans when they got married but now one of them has come to Christ, what should we do? God wants us to walk with him in peace, never having to choose between obeying our God and obeying our spouse so what should we do? If the spouse respects God and the direction he calls, then preserve the marriage. If not, let the unbelieving spouse go their own way and the believer is released and free to remarry. Difficult scenarios require careful and communal reflection upon the authoritative word of God.

So very quickly, what are the principle applications for all of us today? The most obvious one is simply this:

2. Do NOT allow yourself to be yoked to unbelievers

Your primary relationships exert MASSIVE INFLUENCE upon the course of your character, this is simply a FACT OF LIFE. And so the Bible says:

¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ¹⁵And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? (2 Corinthians 6:14-15. NKJV)

Two oxen in one yoke better both agree on the direction they are travelling or there will be chaos, mayhem and pain. It is to peace that God called you. Jesus said:

²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:29-30. NKJV)

As Christians we want to walk with Jesus, we want to step into his yoke and we want to let him lead us and carry us and teach us. This is the good way. This is the blessed way. And so we cannot then try and also yoke ourselves to people travelling the road to hell. The tension and striving will turn our lives into chaos, mayhem and pain. Don't do it. Not only will you find yourself being dragged down the road to hell, but you will threaten to take all of us along for the ride. Christ will not be joined to darkness, so let it go. You cannot worship God and join hands or join hearts with pagans. You can't date them because like Solomon you are not as smart as you think, you can't handle it, you will fall in love, you will fall asleep and you will fall away into ruin. Our God is a jealous God and he does not share allegiance. And then lastly, this passage teaches us that:

3. It is way easier to just not sin in the first place

This story is a giant, tragic illustration of how hard it is to get the toothpaste back into the tube! It is way better to not make the mess in the first place! My grandmother used to say: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”, do you know this one? It means that cleaning up a mess takes far more energy than the basic steps that would have prevented the mess in the first place. That is what this story is saying! If you let your life or your family get deep into sin there will be no bloodless way out and you will wish you had taken the simple preventative steps that could have saved you this agony in the first place. Do you think it was easy to send those women and children away? No! They may have married them for gross and awful reasons but I bet they fell in love and I know they loved those children. And I bet you everyone of those men wished they had gone to marriage counselling with their original Jewish wives and had just learned to love each other despite our weaknesses, despite our short comings and despite the fact that we all get ugly as we age. But they followed their lusts into a wildly complicated, interconnected mess of nonsense that ended up being terribly bloody and difficult to unravel. Its hard to put toothpaste back in the tube!

Practically speaking can I draw out two encouragements for us? Number one is this: do not get divorced for stupid reasons. Go to counselling, try something new, spice it up, read a book, work on your own character, take a vacation, confess your own short comings, work on your own shortcomings and pray for godly contentment. Please. I counsel a lot of people who chased the skirt or believed in the perfect man delusion and they all end up wishing they had never let the toothpaste out of the tube. It is way too messy, way too bloody, way too expensive and it DOES hurt the kids.

Secondly, please, please, please, please do not let your kids date pagans. I know you think you can't tell them what to do, but come here, come in a little closer. “YES YOU CAN!!!!!!” You can tell your kids what to do. You can save them from their own GALATIC STUPIDITY!!! They don't know what is best because they are young, full of hormones and they don't KNOW THEIR HISTORY! Be a leader, be a priest, be a parent and save your kids from impossible, bloody, half measures that will ruin their lives and ship wreck their faith. Are you with me church? Amen.

