

Are You Cherishing or Sending Away the Idolatrous Lovers?

Ezra 10:3; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16

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One of those passages of Scripture to which skeptics often turn to demonstrate the alleged cruelty of God and injustice of Biblical morality is the sending away of the foreign/idolatrous women in Ezra 10. Using the worldly wisdom of this age to judge the infinite and eternal wisdom of Almighty God, man promotes himself to godhood and pretends to take the moral high ground in rebuking the Creator of man and Creator of the institution of marriage. It is ever the folly of wicked man to assert his own standard of morality based upon nothing more than his own fallible, ever-changing, poll-taking sense of what is right and wrong. However, without presupposing the eternal, absolutely righteous, and unchangeable Creator-God, who has revealed Himself in nature and Scripture, there is absolutely no foundation for the criticism of temporal, mutable, and corruptible man. Just as God asked Job, so He asks man that is but dust: "Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou has understanding" (Job 38:4). Or as Paul asks the reputedly wise man of this world: "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world" (1 Corinthians 1:20)? No man has been God's counselor from eternity and certainly cannot be God's judge: "For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counselor" (Romans 11:34)? This unshakeable foundation stands firm through all time against the cavils and skepticism of temporary, changeable, and corruptible men: "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (Romans 3:4).

In our study through the Book of Ezra, we have considered how Israel violated God's good Law by inter-religious relationships and unions with the idolatrous people around them and how Israel incurred the just judgment of the Lord against her for this serious sin (a sin aggravated by the fact that Israel had also violated her national and matrimonial covenant with the Lord to be His people in trusting Him, loving Him, and walking in thankful obedience to His commandments). What we now consider this Lord's Day is the action required by God (through His Prophet, Ezra) for the Israelite men to send these foreign/idolatrous women away to whom they had been united. The main points from Ezra 10:3 this Lord Day are stated in the form of the following two questions: (1) Were These Lawful Divorces of Valid Marriages, or Rather Lawful Annulments of Immoral Relationships? (2) What Does God's Sending Away the Idolatrous Lovers Teach Us Today? These are the questions we seek to answer this Lord's Day.

I. Were These Lawful Divorces of Valid Marriages, or Rather Lawful Annulments of Immoral Relationships (Ezra 10:3)?

A. Let us set the contextual stage before delving specifically into this question.

1. In 458 b.c. Ezra left Babylon with a remnant of reformers and arrived in Jerusalem approximately four months later (Ezra 7:8-9). Soon after settling in and continuing reformation of church and state in Jerusalem, Ezra was blindsided by the news that a number of the Israelite men (113 men according to the list found at the end of Ezra 10) had entered into inter-religious and immoral unions with women from the surrounding idolatrous people (in violation of the explicit commandment prohibiting such illicit unions, Deuteronomy 7:3). After Ezra had mourned and publicly confessed the sin of God's people within the Temple court, from the crowd gathered there, Shechaniah approached Ezra and submitted to Ezra the action that must be taken in order to prevent God's righteous judgment from falling once again upon Israel in removing them from the land: the foreign/idolatrous women must be sent away from the Israelite men with whom they had been united (Ezra 10:3,11,19). The congregation of Israel agreed with the Prophet, Ezra, that this course

of action was right and that it should be done (Ezra 10:12, “so must we do”). And those who were guilty “gave their hands” (covenanted with uplifted hands) that they would put away these idolatrous unions with the foreign women (Ezra 10:19). That then is the historical context involving the case before us.

2. Often this case has been presented as a classic example in which the lesser of two evils had to be chosen by Ezra: either divorce or God’s judgment. And since divorce (it is claimed) was a lesser evil than the judgment of God falling again upon Israel, divorce was the option chosen by Ezra. However, I submit there is never a case in which we must choose between two morally evil options. There is always a morally right option that we can choose. It may not be the easy or comfortable option, but God never places us in a situation with only evil options from which to choose. Shall we do evil that good may come? The Holy Spirit (speaking through the Apostle Paul) condemns such an ethical rule (Romans 3:8). I submit that this was not a case in which Ezra chose the lesser of two evils.

B. But what was the nature of the sending away of the foreign/idolatrous women? Was it a lawful divorce (and dissolution) of a valid marriage, or was it a lawful annulment of an immoral relationship? I submit that God (through His Prophet, Ezra) annulled these immoral relationships because they were not deemed by God as being lawfully constituted marriages (they violated the national and matrimonial covenant into which God and Israel had entered, Deuteronomy 7:3). Now what reasons from Ezra 10 would lead to such a conclusion?

1. First of all, the Hebrew expression used to indicate a union between the Israelite men and the foreign/idolatrous women is not the usual word used for taking a wife. The usual Hebrew expression for a marriage is “to take a wife” (using the Hebrew verb *laqach*), as in Deuteronomy 24:1. This form is used approximately 85 times in the Old Testament. That usual expression for marriage is not used in Ezra 9-10. Rather we find an unusual expression that is only used in Ezra and in Nehemiah when referring to the immoral union between the Israelite men and the foreign/idolatrous women: “to dwell (*yahshav*) with strange wives or women” (Ezra 10:2,10,14,17,18; Nehemiah 13:23,27). But aren’t these women called their “wives”? Actually, the Hebrew word for “wives” is the word for “women” (generically, though it is used for “wives” when there is a lawful marital union). Thus, the emphasis may not be upon a marital union with “wives”, but rather upon an immoral relationship with “foreign/idolatrous women”, as far as God’s Law was concerned. Thus, it would seem that we are alerted by the change from the ordinary Hebrew expression for marriage to an extraordinary Hebrew expression for these immoral relationships that the Lord did not view them in the same way that He viewed a lawful marriage.

2. Second, the Hebrew expression used to indicate the putting away of the foreign/idolatrous women from the Israelite men is not the usual Hebrew word used if this was a case of divorce and dissolving lawful marriages. The usual Hebrew words used to express a divorce are: *shahlach*, as in Deuteronomy 24:1; or *gahrash*, as in Leviticus 21:7. However, we find two Hebrew expressions used in Ezra 10 that are not used elsewhere when referring to the sending away of an unfaithful spouse in a divorce: *yahtsah* (Ezra 10:3,19), and *bahdthal* (Ezra 10:11). Once again, I ask, why the unusual terms if these are simply ordinary divorces? Ezra was a competent scribe and learned scholar of the Old Testament Scriptures (Ezra 7:6). Surely, he realized he was using Hebrew words not associated with lawful marriages and lawful divorces in the Old Testament Scriptures. More importantly, the Holy Spirit realized it. Thus, it would seem that we are alerted once again by the change from the usual Hebrew expressions for divorce to extraordinary Hebrew expressions to indicate that the Lord did not view these immoral relationships to be lawfully constituted marriages.

3. Thirdly, although there is a thorough judicial inquiry that is established by Ezra to investigate and render judgment in the various cases of the Israelite men that had been immorally joined to the foreign/idolatrous women (later on in Ezra 10), nothing is said at all about a “bill of divorcement” (in Hebrew “a bill of cutting off”) being issued to these women as was prescribed by God’s Law (in Deuteronomy 24:1). Therefore, I submit what we find here in Ezra 10 is most likely not the divorce and dissolution of valid

marriages, but rather the annulment of immoral relationships according to God's Law (even if these Israelite men had gone through some outward form of legal ceremony, I submit that God did not deem these relationships to be valid marriages, otherwise we would have read what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7, that the believing spouse ought not to leave the unbelieving spouse).

C. An Objection: Was this not cruel and harsh for God (through His Prophet, Ezra) to separate these families (not only the foreign, idolatrous women, but the children from those relationships as well)?

1. Remember that the primary issue was not that these were inter-ethnic marriages (or inter-racial marriages), but rather that these were inter-religious relationships forbidden by the Lord with those who were not God's covenant people and who had mixed idolatry with the true religion (2 Kings 17:41). This was a case of survival, not expedience—survival of the God-fearing marriage and family, survival of the church and state of Israel, and ultimately survival of the one true religion revealed in Scripture, which would all be corrupted through idolatry.

2. The Lord was not ending lawful marriages, but was ending immoral relationships (even if they received the official sanction of those in leadership at that time). Thus, although it painful, it was not a relationship that could be countenanced.

3. Presumably, if these foreign women had been converted to the Lord God of Israel, had forsaken all idolatry, and had come under the national and matrimonial covenant of Israel (as had the Gibeonites, Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabite, Uriah the Hittite etc.), there would have been no religious reason for sending them away or sending their children away. We have noted in recent sermons that it was not the difference in nationality or ethnicity that was the primary reason for the prohibition against such unions, but rather the issue of idolatry (Exodus 34:12-16).

4. Though we are not told what became of these women and these children, many scholars have suggested (and rightly so I believe) that the moral principles of love for even enemies (Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:20-21) and mercy over sacrifice (Luke 10:29-37) would likely have led these men to provide for the necessities of these women and children (and even to be the means of leading them to embrace the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

II. What Does God's Sending Away the Idolatrous Lovers Teach Us Today?

A. Marriage is God's institution and when man seeks to redefine it and even gains a majority of the people, of the courts, and of the legislators to alter what God has established, the Church of Christ must not and cannot receive into membership those whose marriages are no marriages at all according to God's Law (whether incestuous relationships, whether same sex relationships, whether polygamous relationships, or whether adulterous relationships). These so-called marriages in Ezra 9-10 had likely been sanctioned by the governing authorities (for a number of those guilty were leaders in church and state, Ezra 9:2—"yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass"). But that did not make them lawful before God.

B. Although Christians are not to enter into marriages with unbelievers (or even with those who profess faith and yet hold different and contradictory Terms of Communion), nevertheless, the Holy Spirit (speaking through the Apostle Paul) declares that such are yet valid marriages, which believers are not to forsake without Biblical grounds—adultery or desertion (1 Corinthians 7:12-16).

C. God was protecting both the institution of marriage and was protecting a holy seed to carry forth the Gospel and a Biblical Reformation. Are we protecting and preserving the institution of marriage and the family by the way we lovingly lead our wives and children, men? Or are we slowly ripping the very fabric of our marriages and families into pieces by our lack of godly leadership in the use of our time, abilities, and

resources, by our lack of godly example in what we watch, in what we listen to, in what consumes our lives, by our lack of encouraging words in coming alongside to edify with words of care and comfort, by our lack of demonstrable affection, by our willingness to be easily entreated, by our inconsistency in family worship? Are you, dear women of God's Israel, protecting and preserving the institution of marriage and the family by your loving submission to your husbands in all that is lawful, by your being a help to your husband (rather than a rival or thorn in his flesh), by your willingness to manage the home and children (home education) in his absence, by your praying for him, by your self-control when a decision is not made as you desired? Yes, there are many enemies outside our marriages and our families that are seeking to destroy them, but what a shame it is when we are constantly pointing the finger at these enemies, while we destroy the very heart and affection for one another (by our words and deeds), so that there is little to no affection or desire to continue God's institution of marriage and the family.

D. Finally, I submit that we can learn from these immoral relationships of the Israelites how our own idolatry and love for our gods will draw us away from the Lord and make us ripe for God's severe chastening in our own lives. How the Israelites had come to rationalize and excuse themselves and their sin in these immoral relationships is not spelled out for us, however, it is clear that they had become comfortable in their sin (at least until the arrival of Ezra). And this was not simply a sin that had to be dealt with at that time of Ezra, but one that had to be addressed again (approximately 26 years later) at that time of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:25-31) and Malachi (Malachi 2).

1. Oh, our stubbornness to forsake our cherished idols in our hearts and in our lives. We know that they are pulling us away from Christ being the first love in our lives, and yet we, like Israel of old, continue to nurture them, feed them, have relationships with them in our affections, delights, and ambitions (even as we seek to rationalize them away and excuse our involvement with them).

2. These idolatrous relationships in our lives are parasites that are draining us of all spiritual life, grace, and growth in our Christian lives (whether it be the lewdness, blasphemy, hostility to God, and profanity that accompany movies, music, books, magazines, or internet sites; whether it be a preoccupation with our bodies, clothes, appearance over a preoccupation with Jesus Christ; whether it be our games, our entertainments, our jobs, our relationships with others that have gained supremely our heart and affection in this life). Is our standard by which we measure all these activities God's glory, or simply our own glory? I understand how I can eat and drink to the glory of God (by way of giving thanks for my food and drink, and asking God's blessing upon it to the strengthening of the body to fulfill my duties to God and my neighbor). But that is precisely what I should be able to do with all the activities, ambitions, and pursuits of life. Can I thank God for them as a gift from the Lord? Can I ask God's blessing upon them to help me serve the Lord in some way, or am I ashamed to do so? There is no easy way to deal with a parasite, dear ones. We must cast ourselves upon the mercy of God for the resurrection power of Christ to be granted to us, but we must cut it off, uproot it, and flee even the appearance of that evil and temptation.

3. Dear ones, even good blessings can be converted into idols (as the Israelites did with the brazen serpent, Nehushtan, in the days of Hezekiah, 2 Kings 18:4). We praise God for the blessings we enjoy from Him (like our family, our daily bread, lawful recreations and pursuits), but let us never forget Nehushtan.

4. So often we are more concerned with our overly critical obsession with the sins of others, but it is just a way for us to avoid spending time delighting in the Lord, worshiping Him, adoring Him, and inviting Him to search our own hearts, try our own thoughts, to see what are our cherished idols for which we make excuses, procrastinate, and stubbornly resist the Lord in cutting that parasite off from us by God's grace.

5. Dear ones, this is not the super, mature, Christian life that I am describing. This is simply what is described in Scripture as the life of a Christian who trusts in the promises of Christ, who loves Christ and His commandments, who is growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ, and who is denying himself,

taking up his cross, and following Christ (this is simply the one who comes to Christ in faith—not a super Christian). We do not find Biblical warrant to live a carnal Christian life as opposed to a spiritual Christian life (“For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” Romans 8:6).

6. Dear ones, have you become comfortable with your cherished idols and your idolatrous lovers? Have we become like the Church of Ephesus (Revelation 2:2-4)? To the Church of Laodicea, Christ extends the invitation: Revelation 3:20. Dear ones, there is no hope in yourselves—without Christ ye can do nothing (John 15:5). But you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you (Philippians 4:13). “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). This admonition and exhortation will not overwhelm the Christian with a sense of hopelessness and despair, but will to the contrary stir up the Christian to look to Christ and His promises and to exercise himself/herself to godliness. The Christian will be aroused to perseverance, whereas the hypocrite will make excuses as to why it cannot be done, or why it cannot be done right now. The righteous man (thou he falls seven times), yet will he arise each time to persevere in faith, repentance, and loving obedience (Proverbs 24:16). The hypocrite falls and continues in sin, making excuses for sin and making himself/herself comfortable in sin. Which are you: the persevering Christian, or the comfortable hypocrite?

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