

Dealing With Bad Decisions



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Neh. 13:23–25; Deut. 7:3, 4; 2 Cor. 6:14; Ezra 9; Ezra 10; 1 Cor. 7:10–17.*

Memory Text: “And I said: ‘O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens’ ” (*Ezra 9:6, NKJV*).

Ezra and Nehemiah became leaders in communities in which intermarriage with non-Israelites had become the norm. Both leaders were strongly concerned about this, as they wanted to lead the nation into a close relationship with God. They were aware of the negative influence that nonbelievers or idol worshipers could have on the people of Israel, as they had seen the terrible effects throughout history. The Canaanite religions spread throughout Israel until Baal and Asherah were being worshiped on every high hill. Moreover, the influence that pagan spouses had on the Israelite families was detrimental. Balaam advised the Moabites to send their women to the Israelites, sure that the Israelites would turn away from God as they fell for these women. Unfortunately, he was right. Not only do spouses influence each other, but also their children's faith is impacted.

What will Ezra and Nehemiah do with Israel's intermarriage situation? Will they let it go or stand up against it? This week we will look at the way the two leaders approached this issue.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 21.

Nehemiah's Reaction

Read Nehemiah 13:23–25. What happened here, and how do we explain Nehemiah's reaction to the situation?

Since the children didn't speak Aramaic (the language used during the Exile) or Hebrew, they couldn't understand the teachings from Scripture. This was a real problem, because the knowledge of God's revelation could thus be distorted or even disappear. The scribes and priests expounded on the Torah mostly in Aramaic in order to make the preaching clear to the people. However, since the mothers were from Ammon, Ashdod, and Moab and were generally the primary caregivers for the children, it is not surprising that the children didn't speak the language of the fathers, as well. The language we speak informs the way we think about concepts, because we use the vocabulary of that culture. Loss of the biblical language would have meant losing their special identity. Thus, for Nehemiah, it was unthinkable that families were losing touch with the Word of God and consequently their connection with the living God, the Lord of the Hebrews.

Biblical scholars point out that the actions of Nehemiah were most likely a public shaming of the people as part of prescribed punishments at that time. When it says that Nehemiah rebuked them and cursed them, we shouldn't think of Nehemiah using foul language and expletives, but rather that he was speaking over them the curses of the Covenant. Deuteronomy 28 outlines the curses that would happen to those who broke the covenant. It is very possible that Nehemiah chose the words of the Bible to bring them to the realization of their wrong action and the consequences of their poor choices.

Moreover, when the text says that Nehemiah "beat some of the men and pulled out their hair" (*Neh. 13:25, NIV*), instead of seeing Nehemiah in a rage and reacting with fury, we should note that a beating was a prescribed form of public punishment. This kind of behavior was applied only to "some" of them, meaning to the leaders who caused or promoted this wrong behavior. These acts were to serve as methods of public shaming. Nehemiah wanted to ensure that the people understood the gravity of their choices and the results that would ensue from them.

How should we react when we see what we believe is wrongdoing in the church?

Nehemiah's Reproof

Read Nehemiah 13:26, 27. What does this show about how important biblical history is for informing us about the dangers of deviating from the right path?

Solomon was led deeper into sin by the choices he made. It would be accurate to say that Solomon caused his own ruin by disobeying God's command for the kings of Israel: "Neither shall he [the king] multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away" (*Deut. 17:17, NKJV*). Solomon's life is used as a negative example: not only did he marry more than one wife, but significantly, as Nehemiah points out, he chose women who were not worshipers of God.

Why was Nehemiah correct in reproving the nation for intermarriage with pagans? *Gen. 6:1–4; Gen. 24:3, 4; Gen. 28:1, 2; Deut. 7:3, 4; and 2 Cor. 6:14.*

The command not to intermarry was not about nationalism but about idolatry. People in the Bible married non-Israelites. Moses married Zipporah, a Midianite woman; Boaz married Ruth, a Moabite. Instead, the issue with intermarriage in these commands concerns marrying someone who is of a different faith or of no faith. The problem was that the people in Ezra and Nehemiah's time did not choose to marry believers in God. Richard M. Davidson, in *Flame of Yahweh* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), states: "The Edenic plan for marriage . . . called for a complementary wholeness of two partners in spiritual faith as well as other significant values."—Page 316. The pagan wives in this story did not choose to renounce idolatrous worship. Consequently, Nehemiah was perhaps more saddened than outraged by the choices of the people, since to him this demonstrated a lack of real commitment to God.

The Bible gives us formulas for practices that will keep us grounded in God and are designed to maximize our happiness. In the same way, the command to be equally yoked in marriage was supposed to help us lead a better life and to encourage mutual devotion to God.

What principles can we take from these accounts today that can help us protect our faith and that of our family?

Ezra Reacts

Read Ezra 9. How does Ezra respond to hearing about the Israelites' intermarriages? Ezra 9:1, 2 states that the people "have not separated themselves." The word "separated" is used in the following verses, as well: *Lev. 10:10; 11:47; Exod. 26:33; Gen. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18*. What does the use of this word imply about the issue of a believer marrying an unbeliever?

The people approached Ezra with the issue of intermarriage themselves. The terminology they used by listing the nations involved in abominations demonstrated their knowledge of the Torah, as the list is taken directly from biblical accounts. Interestingly, the civil leaders brought the news to Ezra, as even the spiritual leaders of the nation, priests and Levites, were guilty of this transgression.

"In his study of the causes leading to the Babylonish captivity, Ezra had learned that Israel's apostasy was largely traceable to their mingling with heathen nations. He had seen that if they had obeyed God's command to keep separate from the nations surrounding them, they would have been spared many sad and humiliating experiences. Now when he learned that notwithstanding the lessons of the past, men of prominence had dared transgress the laws given as a safeguard against apostasy, his heart was stirred within him. He thought of God's goodness in again giving His people a foothold in their native land, and he was overwhelmed with righteous indignation and with grief at their ingratitude."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 620.

The word "separate" is used for contrasting entities. In fact, it denotes complete opposites. By this statement the people acknowledged a prior understanding and knowledge of God's command to stay away from false religions. They understood that no one could say that he or she will marry a spouse whose contrasting beliefs will have no impact on the marriage relationship or how they raise their children. They realized how serious the situation had become.

What can we do to seek to keep faith alive in our homes and families, even if we have made wrong decisions in the past?

Ezra Acts

Read Ezra 10. How did Ezra and the leaders tackle the issue of inter-marriage?

Together, the whole assembly decided to send the foreign wives away. Amazingly, even those who married them agreed with the plan, except for the four men mentioned by name in Ezra 10:15. The Jews promised to send their spouses away, and it took three months for the plan to be carried out. In the end, 111 Jewish men sent their wives away (*Ezra 10:18–43*). Interestingly, the last verse (*Ezra 10:44*) states that some of these mixed marriages already had children. Sending away the mothers from families with children doesn't seem rational or even right to us. However, we must remember that this was a unique time, during which God was starting over with the Jewish nation, and, in a sense, they with Him. Fully following God required radical measures.

The specific words used in Ezra 10:11, 19 for “separate yourself” (*badal*) and “put away” (*yatza*) are not used anywhere else in the Scriptures for divorce. Ezra would have known the terminology regularly used for divorce, but he chose not to use it. Thus it is apparent that Ezra did not consider the marriages valid after it was discovered that they were in violation of the Torah command. In other words, the marriages were nullified because they were contrary to the law. The process was dissolution of invalid marriages. However, we are not given information on what happened to those wives and children and what impact this action had on the community. According to the custom of that time, the former husbands would have taken care of the transfer of their former wives and their children. The wives normally would have gone back to their native fathers' homes.

Over time, however, some Jewish men once again began to marry unbelievers, and perhaps some even returned to the wives they sent away. The fleeting nature of the solution can be attributed to human nature and our up-and-down cycle of commitment to God. Even those of us who consider ourselves strong believers have to admit that we have gone through periods of lesser dedication to God, when our walk with Him could have accurately been described as wanting. Unfortunately, humanity struggles with putting God first.

What has been your experience with times of “lesser dedication to God”? What have you learned from those experiences?

Marriage Today

From what we have seen in Ezra and Nehemiah about this issue of mixed marriages, it's clear that God takes marriage seriously, and that we should, as well. We should prayerfully consider a potential marriage partner, and include God in the decision-making. And we should decide to be faithful to God's principles, which can protect us from much sadness and misery.

Look up how Paul was dealing with this issue when a Christian had an unbelieving spouse. Study carefully 1 Corinthians 7:10–17. How should we approach marriages that are unequally yoked today?

Because we have no elaborate command in the Bible on what to do with interfaith marriages, it would be very unwise and run against the intention of the text and its principles to insist that separating from the unbelieving spouse is the right approach and, based on this account by Ezra, must be recommended. Ezra-Nehemiah's situation was a onetime event and according to God's will (*Ezra 10:11*), because the future and worship of the whole community of Israel was at risk. They were losing their identity as worshipers of a living God.

We know that in the Jewish Elephantine settlement in Egypt (contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah) the leaders allowed intermixed marriages and shortly developed a mixed religion with Yahweh and his pagan consort, the goddess Anat. Additionally, the Messianic line was in danger. Therefore, this onetime event shouldn't be taken as a prescription for the breaking up of marriages and families whenever a believer marries an unbeliever. Instead, the account does demonstrate the high value God places on equally yoked partnership in marriage. Satan is happy when we end up married to a person who does not encourage devotion to God, because he knows that if both spouses have the same conviction, then they will be stronger in their mission work for God than if just one is faithful.

While the Bible clearly counsels against unequally yoked marriages (*2 Cor. 6:14*), we also find passages of extended grace to those who have made a different choice. God empowers those who have married unbelievers to be faithful to God and their spouses. God doesn't abandon us even when we make choices contrary to His will, and if we ask Him for help, He will provide it. This doesn't mean that we do whatever we want and then expect God to bless us nevertheless, but rather that when we come to Him with a need and a humble heart, He always hears. Without God's grace there would be no hope for any of us, because we are all sinners.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Reformation,” pp. 669–678, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“Industry in a God-appointed duty is an important part of true religion. Men should seize circumstances as God’s instruments with which to work His will. Prompt and decisive action at the right time will gain glorious triumphs, while delay and neglect result in failure and dishonor to God. If the leaders in the cause of truth show no zeal, if they are indifferent and purposeless, the church will be careless, indolent, and pleasure-loving; but if they are filled with a holy purpose to serve God and Him alone, the people will be united, hopeful, eager.

“The word of God abounds in sharp and striking contrasts. Sin and holiness are placed side by side, that, beholding, we may shun the one and accept the other. The pages that describe the hatred, falsehood, and treachery of Sanballat and Tobiah, describe also the nobility, devotion, and self-sacrifice of Ezra and Nehemiah. We are left free to copy either, as we choose. The fearful results of transgressing God’s commands are placed over against the blessings resulting from obedience. We ourselves must decide whether we will suffer the one or enjoy the other.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 676.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As we read these stories, it seems clear that many of the people weren’t dedicated to God in the first place, which is why they chose pagan wives. Thus, Ezra doesn’t just leave them to their own devices, but attempts to reprove and correct them in hopes of achieving change. Did the change truly occur though? By changing their behavior, did they change within? Did their devotion to God truly grow? What evidence do we have that many of them didn’t really change? What can we learn from their mistakes about how important a change of heart really is?
- 2 What are ways that we can help those in our church who might be struggling with the problems that come from unwise marriages?
- 3 Though God’s principles are eternal and absolute, cultures vary greatly. Why must we keep these differences in mind as we seek to apply God’s principles to our own lives and situations?

God's Math

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Jannie Bekker, a genteel South African with wavy blond hair, was deployed to Vietnam's capital with \$2 million and the momentous task of establishing the Seventh-day Adventist Church's first "urban center of influence" in the southeast Asian country.

Bekker, however, struggled to find a suitable property in Hanoi. The asking price for a vacant lot topped \$2 million and often approached \$3 million to \$4 million.

Bekker prayed as he made trip after trip to Hanoi from the Singapore-based headquarters of the Adventist Church's Southeast Asia Union Mission, where he works as special assistant to the president.

"I've lost count of how many trips I've made to Vietnam," Bekker said. "It was 15 or 20 maybe."

Bekker was assigned the job after Adventist Church president Ted N. C. Wilson appealed for a community center to serve the people of Hanoi in 2014. Wilson—who spoke after visiting the city and leading milestone evangelistic meetings in Ho Chi Minh City—pledged to help raise the needed funds, with the understanding that he would match the amount contributed by the Southern Asia-Pacific Division and Southeast Asia Union Mission. In the end, the Adventist world church gave \$1 million, and the division and union each gave \$500,000.

But Bekker couldn't find a plot of land. The properties that he inspected cost too much or were badly located. A potential deal fell through.

Then a friend of a friend introduced Bekker to a developer who owned a lot and was constructing a seven-story building on it. The developer wanted only \$1.8 million for everything. The moment that Bekker saw the property, he knew it was perfect.

Bureaucracy and other snags delayed the purchase for months. Another buyer caught wind of the property and offered a larger amount of money. Bekker kept praying, and the developer ultimately rejected the new offer, saying the Adventist plan sought to benefit the community and not enrich the owners.

Bekker beamed with joy on May 22, 2018, as Wilson and other leaders inaugurated the seven-story building, which will house a bookstore, a health-food store, a foreign-language school, a music school, a health center, ADRA's Vietnam headquarters, and meeting halls for two congregations.



"God came through in a more miraculous way than I ever, ever anticipated," Bekker said. "He gave us more than what we prayed for. We give all honor and glory to Him."

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ezra 9:6*

Study Focus: *Ezra 9, Ezra 10, Nehemiah 13:23–31*

Among the bad decisions that the Israelites made were their intermarriages with unbelievers who did not share their belief in the true, living God. The two sections studied in this lesson deal with the realization that the people of God had mixed their families with those who had no desire to follow God and were idolaters. The book of Nehemiah closes with a brief account of Nehemiah's contention with some of the Jews because they were compromising in their dedication to God by marrying unbelievers. Nehemiah points out that Solomon fell because of his bad choice of marrying idolatrous women. God's people needed to learn from Solomon's bad experience. Nehemiah publicly shamed the men who had married idolatrous wives, reminding them that their choices would either lead them toward God or away from God.

Interestingly, Ezra had dealt with the exact same situation some years earlier. In Ezra 9 and 10, we read Ezra's prayer of confession as he acknowledges the seriousness of intermarriage with unbelievers. They were a nation at the point of a new start and were either going to grow into a greater commitment to God or influence each other away from Him. The zeal of Ezra and Nehemiah in this situation brought the nation to their knees, and many of the men reformed by separating from their unbelieving spouses.

Thus, learning from these stories, we are to think carefully about our choice of a spouse. But most important, we must learn from the principle uplifted here: make choices that will lead us closer to God, rather than away from Him. Every decision should be weighed and based on where we will end up in the future if we keep doing it.

Part II: Commentary

Nehemiah 13: Nehemiah's Reaction and Radical Dealing With Mixed Marriages

Nehemiah pointed the people to the example of King Solomon, reminding them that even Solomon, the wisest king that ever lived, fell, through bad decisions, into the idolatry his women promoted. Nehemiah asked the Israelites if they thought that they were immune to the influences of the

idolaters living within their own homes. Playing with fire produces only fire. Even the priests were not following God wholeheartedly in this matter. The grandson of the high priest married the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite, one of the worst enemies of Israel. A priest was strictly enjoined to marry a “virgin from his own people, so he will not defile his offspring among his people” (*Lev. 21:14, 15, NIV*). Consequently, Nehemiah “drove him [the grandson of the high priest] away” (*Neh. 13:28, NIV*). This radical action demonstrated the seriousness with which Nehemiah held the issue of marriage among believers. Marriage should reflect God’s principles of love and is a nuclear unit for building the church and society.

Ezra 9: Ezra Confronted With the Problem and His Prayer

Some years before, Ezra also dealt with the intermarriage situation. When Ezra was told that some people, leaders, and priests had married wives who had not given their hearts to God, Ezra was shaken. He tore his clothes and sat for a long time disheveled and shocked. After all the Israelites had experienced, he could not believe that the sins that had caused them to go into exile and from which they had just emerged were once again prevalent in Israel. Not wishing to be different from the surrounding nations before the exile, Israel had been led away from God by accepting the worship of their neighbors’ gods. This mixing with other nations led them into evil practices and syncretistic worship. And now they were on the verge of falling into the same sins. To top it off, they had just barely gotten out of Babylon. Ezra was so distressed and saddened by the news that he sat grieving until the evening sacrifice. He then prostrated himself before God and prayed a beautiful prayer, confessing the sins of the nation and stating that he could not even lift his face up to God because of what his people had done.

Ezra 9:9 states: “God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us.” The Hebrew word translated as mercy is *chesed*, which means much more than just mercy. It implies steadfast love and faithfulness, or loving-kindness. God extended mercy in order to (1) grant (*natan*—to give) a revival, (2) repair (*rum*—set up) the house, (3) rebuild (*amad*—to stand) the ruins, and (4) bestow upon (*natan*—to give) Israel a wall. These are all action verbs, showing that God did not forsake His people. Instead, He extended help so those four things could happen: He worked to repair, to rebuild, to give, and to revive the people. “Revive” is mentioned twice, also appearing in verse 8. The word for “revive” is *michyah*, which means life-giving and also saving a life, relief, recovering, and sustenance (such as food). In other words, Ezra emphasized that God gave them “life.” He saved their life, gave them what they needed, and revived them so that they could do the work that needed to be done in the city of Jerusalem. Moreover, He revived them so they could be “whole” again.

But they were throwing away all God's blessings by intermarrying with idol worshippers. The wholeness that God wanted for His people was being undermined by their choices. Ezra was worried that they could not continue to be fully revived as God's people if many of them chose to bond themselves with partners who had no regard for God. Especially at this time of starting over as a nation, being only a remnant group, Ezra felt it was imperative that the Israelites follow God and not get mixed up again with practices that would lead them away from Him. Strict conformity to God's Word was especially important at this time, because the children in these marriages would not even know the language of the Bible.

Ezra 10: The Solution

Ezra's concern and deep conviction over this issue impressed upon the people the gravity of their actions. They started gathering around Ezra and weeping with him. One man or woman who is deeply dedicated to God can have a profound influence on those around them. A godly leader who does not overlook evil actions inspires godliness in others. The leaders came up with a solution of sending the wives and children away. These marriages were not according to God's will; therefore, the word for divorce is not mentioned.

Today, when deciding on the question of separation from unbelieving spouses, we look at the principle behind their actions rather than at the letter of the word. Paul counsels believing spouses not to leave their unbelieving spouse who truly wants to remain married. On the other hand, no one should force an unbelieving spouse to remain married to a believing spouse against his or her will (*1 Cor. 7:12–15*). No one can force such an unequal arrangement. Therefore, the principle that comes to the forefront is making godly choices in all areas of life. Thus, according to God's instructions, we must choose wisely whom we marry. Also, we must live wisely in marriage, whether to a believer or an unbeliever. In addition, we must make wise choices. We must represent God in how we conduct business, do our jobs, raise children, and interact with others, including the way we address issues with our spouse or with someone who is angry at us.

An important word that appears within both chapters is *chared*, which means "to tremble" or "to fear" (*Ezra 9:4, Ezra 10:3*). The first instance states that "everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled" to Ezra. The second instance reports that the solution of separation was done because of the advice of those who "tremble at the commandment of our God." Therefore, trembling at the "word of God" and the "commandment of God" is linked as one, meaning that each phrase is just a clarification of the other. The idea of trembling at the Word of God is

mentioned in a few other places in the Bible, such as in Isaiah 66, where it is mentioned twice. “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (*Isa. 66:2, ESV*). “Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word” (*Isa. 66:5, ESV*). The idea of trembling before God and His word connotes the right spirit of humility in approaching God and the Scriptures. We acknowledge that we do not know everything and therefore approach with humbleness to learn and willingly follow what we hear or read. We are not critical of the Word but rather the Word functions as a guide for us.

Thus, the greatest lesson we can learn from the issue that Ezra and Nehemiah had to deal with is “trembling” at God’s Word. The people trembled before God and, therefore, were willing to do the maximum in order to have a strong relationship with Him. Trembling before God leads to obedience to God’s Word and, in turn, to happiness and joy in life. May we also tremble at His Word, and let nothing come between us and obedience to the Scriptures. Being a disciple means obeying, not just knowing. “Trust and obey” as the song says, “for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, no. 590).

Part III: Life Application

- 1. Just as God acted in the lives of the Israelites and provided for them, as is demonstrated through the action verbs used in Ezra 9:9, God also still acts in our lives today. Think of things that God is doing for you in life now. Share them with your class or small group.**

- 2. God wanted to revive the Israelite remnant and make them whole again but, as Ezra and Nehemiah pointed out, intermarriage with idolaters was keeping them from experiencing the fullness of God’s plan for their life. They were missing out on a close walk with God. God wants to make us whole and revive us, as well. Reflect upon whether or not there is anything in your life that stands in the way of true happiness and harmony with God. What is keeping you from a deeper relationship with God?**

3. Those who trembled at the Word of God assembled to Ezra and decided to make changes in their corporate dedication to God.

a. In what way should we “tremble” before the Word of God?

b. What can you do as a church to rededicate your lives to God?

c. What can you personally do to commit your life to God?

d. How can having an accountability partner assist you in making a change?
