

# What Should We Do About Our Bad Decisions?



## SABBATH—DECEMBER 14

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Nehemiah 13:23–25; Nehemiah 13:26, 27; Ezra 9; Ezra 10.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “I prayed, ‘I am filled with shame and dishonor [I have lost respect for myself], my God. I can hardly look to you and pray. That’s [that is] because our sins are piled up above our heads. Our guilt reaches all the way to the heavens’ ” (Ezra 9:6, NlrV).

**EZRA AND NEHEMIAH** become leaders in communities where many people married non-Jews. Soon this practice becomes normal among the Jews. Ezra and Nehemiah are upset about this practice. They want to lead the Jews back to God. Ezra and Nehemiah know what can happen when the Jews marry non-Jews who worship false gods. These false gods can lead God’s people away from God. Look at Israel’s history. Then you will see that Ezra and Nehemiah are right. Awful things happened in the past when the Israelites married people who worshiped false gods. Then God’s people started to follow the Canaanite religions that their husbands and wives followed. Soon God’s people started to worship Baal and Asherah on every high hill in Israel. But that is not all. This false worship hurt Jewish families and their children. The prophet, or special messenger, Balaam told the Moabites to send their women to the Israelite men to lead them away from God. His plan worked.

What will Ezra and Nehemiah do about these marriages? Will they do nothing? Or will they stand for God’s truth? This week we look at how these two men solved the problem.



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## WHAT DOES NEHEMIAH DO? (Nehemiah 13:23–25)

**Read Nehemiah 13:23–25. What happens in these verses? What does Nehemiah do? How do you explain his actions?**

In this story, we read about a group of children. These children have Jewish fathers. The fathers speak the Aramaic language. Aramaic is the language that the Jews spoke when they lived in Babylon. But their children do not know how to speak the Aramaic language. The children do not speak the Hebrew language either. So, this is a big problem. Why? Because the teachers of the law teach mostly in the Aramaic language. That is the easiest language for the Jews to understand. Why do these children not understand Hebrew or Aramaic? Their Jewish fathers married non-Jewish women from Ammon, Ashdod, and Moab. The mothers take care of the children all day and speak to them in their languages. So, it is no surprise that the children do not speak either the Hebrew language or Aramaic. Language is important. We use the words that are connected with our way of life. So, language helps us talk about and share our thoughts and ideas. The children cannot speak the language that the Bible is written in. So, they do not understand what it means to be a Jew. For Nehemiah, this is a big problem. He is upset that Jewish families cannot understand the Bible. They will lose their connection with the living God.



**Nehemiah is upset that Jewish families cannot understand the Bible.**

Nehemiah punishes the people in public. Bible thinkers say that Nehemiah's actions are normal for his time. It is the way leaders punished people back then. The Bible says that Nehemiah curses the men. We should not think that Nehemiah uses cuss words! No, Nehemiah reads to them the curses from God's Covenant, or Special Agreement, in Deuteronomy 28. Nehemiah warns the people what will happen to them when they break the Agreement. Clearly, Nehemiah wants to help the people understand their wrong actions and bad choices. Their sin will bring God's curses.

Now let us look at what Nehemiah does next. Nehemiah says "I beat up some of them. I pulled their hair out" (Nehemiah 13:25, NIV). A beating also is a normal form of punishment in Nehemiah's time. Do you see that Nehemiah beats only "some of them"? Not everyone. Nehemiah punishes only the leaders who caused the wrong behavior or said it was OK. Why does Nehemiah punish the people? Nehemiah wants to make sure that they understand something important. They must make good choices. Or bad things will happen.

## NEHEMIAH SHOWS THE PEOPLE THEIR SIN (Nehemiah 13:26, 27)

**Read Nehemiah 13:26, 27. What do these verses show us about why it is important to know Bible history? How can it help us to stay away from danger? How can it also help us to walk on the right road that leads to heaven?**

Nehemiah tells the people to remember what happened to King Solomon. Solomon did not obey God's law. Solomon married many wives. He also chose to marry women who did not worship God. God's law warns us: " 'The king must not have many wives. If he does, they will lead him astray [away from the LORD]' " (Deuteronomy 17:17, NIV). Solomon made bad choices. His choices led him into more sin. He caused his own ruin. Solomon's life is an example of what God's people should **not** do.

**Nehemiah tells the Jews that they sinned when they married people who do not worship God. Why is Nehemiah right? For the answers, read Genesis 6:1–4; Genesis 24:3, 4; Genesis 28:1, 2; Deuteronomy 7:3, 4; and 2 Corinthians 6:14.**

Why does God tell His people not to marry non-Jews? Because God does not want His people to start worshiping false gods. Yes, God's people in the Bible marry non-Israelites. Moses marries Zipporah. She is from Midian. Boaz marries Ruth. She is from Moab. So, God's command is not against marrying someone from a different country. God's command is against marrying someone from a different faith. Or no faith at all. That is exactly the problem in Ezra and Nehemiah's time. The Jews choose to marry women who do not believe in God. These women do not choose to give up their false gods. So, Nehemiah is sad that the Jewish men chose to marry these wives. These men show by their choices that they do not care about serving God.

The Bible gives us rules to follow. These rules help us stay close to God. They cause us to be happy. In the same way, God gives His people, then and now, the rule not to marry people who do not believe in Him. We should only marry people who love Him and share our faith. Then we will lead better lives that will help us grow closer to God.

**What can we learn from today's study that can help us protect our faith and our families?**



**Solomon made bad choices.  
His choices led him into  
more sin.**

## WHAT DOES EZRA DO? (Ezra 9)

Read Ezra 9. Ezra learns about the marriages that the Jews make with people who worship false gods. How does Ezra act when he hears this news? Ezra 9:1, 2, ERV, tell us that the Israelites “ ‘have not kept themselves separate from the other people’ ” living around them. As you can see, the word “separate” is sometimes written as “tell the difference”: Leviticus 10:10; Leviticus 11:47; Exodus 26:33; Genesis 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18. What do these verses teach us about the word “separate”? Why does the Bible warn us against marrying anyone who does not believe in God?

The leaders of God’s people come to Ezra. They tell him about the problem in the land. God’s people have married non-Jewish women. These wives worship false gods. The problem is big. The priests, or religious leaders, are guilty. The Levites are too. So, these men do not come to tell Ezra about the problem. The princes, or leaders of the Jews, come to tell Ezra about what is going on.

The word “separate” shows us two different things or ideas. It also shows us that the leaders understand God’s law. They know God wants His people to stay away from false religions. They understand the danger of marrying someone who worships false gods. A wife or husband who does not worship God will hurt the spiritual life of the family.

“Ezra studied Israel’s history. He looked at the sins that led to his people’s ruin before their enemies carried them away to Babylon. Ezra learned the cause of Israel’s ruin. God’s people married husbands and wives from other religions. Ezra saw something else important too. He saw that God’s people did not obey God’s law to stay separate from the people around them. Then they had many sad experiences that caused them to feel ashamed. Now Ezra learns that God’s people are doing the same thing that got the Jews in trouble in the past. They have not learned their lesson from history. Some Jewish leaders break God’s law against wrong marriages. God gave His people this law to keep them from turning away from Him. The leaders marry wives who do not believe in God. The news upsets Ezra. God gave His people a 2nd chance. But the people are not thankful to God. So, Ezra feels angry. He is sad that the Jews do not care about the good things that God does for them.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 620, adapted.



**A wife or husband who does not worship God will hurt the spiritual life of the family.**

## EZRA'S DECISION (Ezra 10)

**Read about the problem in Ezra 10. What do Ezra and the leaders do to solve it?**

The leaders make an agreement. They decide to send the foreign wives away. Do you know what is surprising? All the men who marry the foreign wives agree to the plan too! All of them except for four men. You can read about them in Ezra 10:15. So, the people promise to send their wives away. It takes three months for the Jews to carry out the plan. In the end, 111 Jewish men send their wives away (Ezra 10:18–43). Ezra 10:44 shows us that some of these men and their foreign wives have children. Of course, it is hard for us to understand this decision. How can these men ask their wives and children to leave, right? It does not seem right to us. But we must remember something. This time is special in Israel's history. God wants to be close with His people again. He wants to give them a new start. The people turned away from Him in the past. Then their enemies took them to Babylon. So, the Jews must follow God carefully now, even if it is hard to obey Him at times.

In Ezra 10:11, 19, the words written as “separate yourself” come from the Hebrew word “**badal**.” The words written as “put away” come from the Hebrew word “**yatza**.” “**Badal**” and “**yatza**” are never written as “divorce” in the Bible. What does that tell us? It shows us that Ezra believes these marriages are not legal. Why? Because they break God's law. So, Ezra announces that the marriages are not real because they go against God's law. We do not know what happens to the wives and children from these marriages. We do not know how their leaving Judah changed the community. We do know that the husbands are in charge of sending their own wives and children away. Where do the wives go? Back to their father's homes.

After some time passes, some Jewish men again decide to marry foreign wives. Maybe they even go back to the wives they sent away. It is easy to talk about these people from far away in our time, right? But we must remember that all of us are human. We have a hard time doing what is right on our own and continuing to do it. We need God's help and power to make us strong. Even strong believers will say that there were times when they did not always walk with God as they should. Sadly, as humans, we must work hard to put God first in our lives.



**The leaders decide to send the foreign wives away.**

**MARRIAGE TODAY (1 Corinthians 7:10–17)**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah show us something important about marriage. God cares deeply about who we marry. So, we should care deeply too. We should pray carefully about the person we want to marry. We also should include God in any decision we make. We must be loyal to God's rules in the Bible. These Bible rules will help protect us from bad choices and the pain and suffering they can cause us.

**What advice does Paul have for someone who is married to a husband or wife who is not a Christian? For the answer, study carefully 1 Corinthians 7:10–17. What should you do about your marriage when your husband or wife does not believe in God?**

It is not very wise for you to think that Ezra's answer is right and that you must separate from your husband or wife. Remember, Ezra and Nehemiah lived in a special time. God wanted to be close to His people again after being separated from them. So, God showed Ezra and Nehemiah His plan about marriage for His people (Ezra 10:11). The people were in danger. Their wives did not believe in God. So, the Jews must send their wives and children away.

We know about what happened in a Jewish community in Egypt. This community lived during the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah. The Jewish leaders in the Egyptian community allowed the people to marry foreign wives who worshiped false gods. Very soon, the Jews mixed their religion with their wives' religion. The wives worshiped the goddess Anat. So, they made a new religion with the Jews. They made their goddess the "wife" of God! So, we can see why there was a real need to keep the Jewish faith clean. And we should not use what Ezra and Nehemiah did to break up marriages and families today where Christians are married to non-Christians. At the same time, Ezra and Nehemiah show us that God cares deeply about who we marry. Marriage is very important to God. Satan is very happy when we marry someone who does not encourage us to be close to God. He knows what will happen when a husband and wife are close to God and share the same faith. They will be stronger in their work for God together. We can do more for God together than if we have to work alone.



**We should pray carefully about the person we want to marry.**

**ADDITIONAL THOUGHT:** Read Ellen G. White, “Reformation,” pages 669–678, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“God wants us to work hard at the work He gives us. Hard work is an important part of true religion. It is important for us to act at the right time. So, we should look for the best ways and times to do God’s work. We must make good decisions. Then we will win. But if we wait and do not act, then we will fail. We will not honor God. Our leaders must show a love for God’s cause too. The leaders must show that they care deeply about doing His work. If the leaders fail to show they care, then the church will not care either. Church members will love pleasure. They will be lazy. So, the church must be filled with holy love for God. The church must want to serve God alone. Then we will be in agreement with each other. We will have hope.

“The Bible is filled with many stories. Some stories show us people’s sins. Other stories show us holy men and women. God puts the stories of their lives side by side in the Bible for us to see. God wants us to turn away from sin and to accept a holy life. The stories help us make the right choice. In the Bible we read about Sanballat and Tobiah. These men were filled with hate. They lied. They did evil things. The Bible also shows us the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah. These men respected God. They had honor. They were unselfish. God made us free to copy Sanballat and Tobiah’s example or Ezra and Nehemiah’s example. The choice is ours. The Bible shows us what happens when we break God’s law. Then we also see how God blesses us when we obey Him. We must decide for ourselves if we want to suffer God’s curses or enjoy His blessings.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 676, adapted.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① As we read Ezra and Nehemiah, we see that many men do not put God first. They marry foreign wives. Ezra corrects these men. Yes, they send their wives away. But do their hearts change too? Does their love for God grow stronger? What proof do we have that many men did not change? What can we learn from their mistakes? How important is a heart change?
- ② Are there people in your church who made unwise marriages? What problems are they having? What can we do as a church to help them?



**“We must decide for ourselves if we want to suffer God’s curses or enjoy His blessings.”**