

Ezra 7 - 10; Nehemiah 13; Malachi 2

The Dangers of Mixing with the World

The lesson this week is from Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi.

It has been about 60 years since the Temple was completed by Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest.

Ezra travels from exile to Judea after the Temple is completed, during the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes, the son of Xerxes (the Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther and the events of Purim).

Artaxerxes, like Cyrus and Darius, was sympathetic to the Jews. He might have been influenced by Queen Esther.

Ezra's mission was the second phase of a multi-phase illustration that God was giving us:

The Temple and its ministries > Torah teaching > Walls of Jerusalem

The Temple, its building, furniture and vessels and altar were sending a message all by themselves. The layout and structure itself, the Brazen Altar, the Lampstand, the Altar of Incense, the Table of Shewbread - all pointed to the Messiah and His ministry. The sacrifices pointed to his once and for all sacrifice for sin.

Then the priests and Levites were cleansed and set in their appointed areas of service so that the daily ministry could begin.

Now 60 years later, another ingredient was required - The Torah. Apparently the people's knowledge of scripture was very rudimentary. They needed to be taught.

Ezra was both a priest and a scribe who was learned in the Torah. His mission was to teach and instruct the people.

Ezra 7:10 - "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments."

Without teaching from the Torah, what was going on in the Temple would make no sense.

Ezra's arrival was like the giving of the Law at Sinai again. Immediately it revealed sin.

That's one of its purposes. Paul said "I had not known sin, but by the law"(**Romans 7:7**)

The presence of Jesus, who is the Word and fulfilled the Law, had the same effect.

- **John 15:22** - "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now

they have no cloak for their sin."

What was the sin?

Intermarriage with Idolators

Both Ezra and later Nehemiah encountered a huge threat - intermarriage of many of the Jewish returnees with Samaritans and others of the surrounding population. The Torah did not allow Moabites and Ammonites to join with Israel, for instance. Nor were Jews allowed to marry any of the Canaanites peoples. The Samaritans degraded version of Judaism mixed with idolatry was no better.

Deuteronomy 7:3-4 commands the Israelites not to intermarry with the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. The text explains that marrying them would turn children away from following God and lead them toward idolatry.

Ezra describes the problem in a prayer of confession:

Ezra 9:1-2 - "Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass."

This was the sin that got King Solomon in trouble. He married foreign princesses for alliances but they brought their idols and false gods with them (**1 Kings 11:1-6**).

The sin was not simply marrying a non-Jew. The story of Ruth and Boaz was an example of a Gentile who converted to Judaism and was accepted. Rahab is another example.

The "holy seed" in **Ezra 9:2** not only refers to the Jews as a people but more importantly to "the one seed, which is Christ."

- **Galatians 3:16** - "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ."

The threat was a diluting and degrading of the Jewish culture of Torah observance and the continuance of Jews as a distinct people through which the Messiah would enter the world. If the royal bloodline was corrupted, it would disallow fulfillment of prophecy.

Nehemiah encountered the same problem later when he arrived decades after Ezra with a mission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem - also at the direction of Persia king

Artaxerxes.

Again, this was not simply racial bias against Canaanites and Samaritans.

Ruth the Moabitess and Rahab, a Canaanite, had renounced their previous gods, were transformed and converted, believing in the God of Israel. (The Gentile believer Ruth is in the lineage of Jesus.) But that was not what had happened here.

The mostly upper-class Jews who married Gentile wives did it to arrange alliances and try to gain wealth from these already established clans. Nehemiah learns that their children understand almost no Hebrew and know nothing of the true God of Israel.

- **Nehemiah 13:24** - "And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people."

These women had not converted to Judaism and their children were being raised as pagan idol worshippers. Through these marriage alliances, Jewish land might be lost and taken over by Gentile relatives. Jewish culture and belief was being abandoned by these families, which threatened the entire nation.

Also, the Sabbath was being ignored, with Samaritan traders setting up their booths and buying and selling goods to the Jews on the Sabbath.

It was even eroding the priesthood.

One of the grandsons of the current high priest, Eliashib, had married a daughter of Sanballat, the governor of neighboring Samaria and a chief enemy of Nehemiah's rebuilding of the city walls who had mocked the effort and tried to discourage the people. That high priest had made a deal with another enemy, Tobiah the Ammonite, giving him funds that should have been tithes paid to the Levites. (**Nehemiah 13:4-5**)

The situation threatened to muddy the priestly lineages and the royal bloodlines from which the Messiah would arise.

It required a radical solution.

First, Nehemiah threw out the Samaritan traders, in a way similar to Jesus cleansing the Temple of the moneychangers. (**Nehemiah 13:21**)

Then those who had married foreign women repented when they heard the Law read to them, and separated from those wives and the children who were born of them.

Ezra 10:11 - "Now therefore make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives."

God had said previously that He hates divorce, but He also hated mixing idolatry in by

marrying idol-worshipping foreign women while the men neglect the "wife of their youth."

Malachi, the last prophetic book in the Old Testament, addresses this same situation. In fact, rabbinical tradition says the book was actually written by Ezra. His prophecies were directed mainly toward the corrupt priesthood.

Malachi 2:11 - "Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god."

The Jews had been wondering why God was not responding to their prayers.

Malachi 2:14 - "Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant."

The next verse is puzzling in the KJV:

Malachi 2:15 - "And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth."

The NET version better explains what this means: "No one who has even a small portion of the Spirit in him does this. What did our ancestor (Abraham) do when seeking a 'godly seed' from God? (i.e. he took Hagar, an Egyptian, as a wife, which turned out to be a disaster). Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth."

Both Abraham and Solomon fell into this sin and it caused damage.

To seek a "godly seed" here is like "holy seed" previously - it can also refer to the coming of Messiah.

Malachi 2:16 - "For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously."

The picture is of a husband covering his wife with a garment of protection, but instead of protection the cloak is violence, caused by neglecting her (or even divorcing her) for a new wife from among the surrounding peoples who worship idols.

Paul addresses this in a New Testament context:

- 2 Corinthians 14-17 - "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye

are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,"

Bottom Line: As we get closer to the birth of Jesus, we see that Satan has always tried to pollute or destroy the bloodline of Messiah throughout history, whether by the Nephilim begetting giants through the daughters of men (**Genesis 6**), or by trying to wipe out Jacob's family as Laban did, or as Pharaoh failed to do. It continued with temptation from the daughters of Midian and Moab in the wilderness at Peor (**Numbers 25**), and by enticing Israel to mix with the Samaritans as happened in these chapters. Not to mention the plot by Haman to destroy the Jews in the book of Esther, and Herod's slaughter of the children hoping to kill Jesus. None of it was successful.

Today the Evil One attempts to derail the kingdom of God by enticing us to mix with the world, to adopt the world's values or, like the Samaritans, he attempts to make us discouraged or depressed. Petty, mundane resentments or discontentment can often do the most damage. Bitterness and cynicism can make us hard-hearted, quenching our love for one another.

But remember that Satan is a defeated foe...

- **1 John 4:4** - "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world."