

Nehemiah 8:2-3
Ezra 9; Ezra 10:7-17, 44

THE PURITY SOLUTION

We are in the third sermon of a series, trying to tell the story of the Second Temple, or at least bits and pieces of it. The Babylonian Captivity was the utter destruction not only of Jerusalem and the temple built by Solomon, but also of the hopes and dreams and promises for which the Children of Israel had lived for over fifteen hundred years. Then, seemingly “out of nowhere” – with the support and blessing of Cyrus, King of Persia – Zerubbabel led a band of Israelites out of Babylon, back to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple. It was like a second Moses, leading the Israelites out of bondage, back to the Promised Land, to rebuild the temple and their Way of Life.

So in time, they rebuilt the temple, reestablished the Covenant, and repaired the walls of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel – temple. Ezra – Covenant. Nehemiah – walls. And all through their story, for over a hundred years, they ran into fierce opposition: jealousy, threats, the efforts of the Samaritans (the people of the land) to shut them down and stop them from rebuilding anything or returning to a faithful Way of Life.

The sheer fact is that Judaism – the religion of the Covenant between Yahweh and his people – would have died if its people had not in some way returned to faithfulness, worship, and obedience to their God. This is not to say that they did it in the only right way or the only possible way. All through the Second Temple period, they were right on the verge of losing it all again. Politically speaking, Judaism would barely limp along until shortly after the time of Jesus – just long enough for the New Covenant in Christ to be born. Religiously speaking, it’s as if this period was preparing Judaism for a far longer “captivity” – that is, a two-thousand-year captivity, as opposed to the seventy-year one they had just come through. Clearly that’s a bigger story than we can handle. Nevertheless, Judaism as we know it reemerged out of the Second Temple period in Jerusalem, not out of the remnant that was content to remain in Babylon.

So we pick up our story today with the coming of Ezra the Priest – a descendent of Aaron, the brother of Moses and first High Priest of Israel. Fifty-eight years have passed since the dedication of the Second Temple. Ezra is sent to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. by Artaxerxes, King of Persia, for the express purpose of teaching the Law to the people of

Jerusalem. Again we are surprised. Why is a Zoroastrian monarch concerned about reestablishing Jewish ways in Jerusalem? Why is a teacher of the Law of Moses granted such authority by a pagan king? Nevertheless, Ezra is sent for the express purpose of teaching the Law in Jerusalem. Perhaps Artaxerxes doesn't realize that this means reestablishing the Covenant between Yahweh and Yahweh's people. More probably it means that Israel, despite the rebuilding of the temple, is in terrible conflict and disarray. (We get some picture of this period between Zerubbabel and Ezra from Third Isaiah (chapters fifty-six through sixty-six) and Malachi.) We suspect that Artaxerxes may be hoping to bring order out of chaos by calling people back to their own Law and their own religion, rather than by trying to impose his own.

As an aside, some of you have asked me if Judaism honored and appreciated these Persian kings who showed such surprising support and concern for the Jews. Indeed yes! There was especially honor and appreciation for Cyrus, who set the trend in motion. Perhaps partly because the Persian kings were so supportive, Judaism ingested considerable influence from Persian culture and religion. It's a whole other subject, to be sure, but concepts of Satan, Hell, the fight between the forces of light and the forces of darkness – all strong tenets of Zoroastrianism – if they existed in Judaism before, they were certainly muted until after the Babylonian Captivity. Zoroastrianism is a nearly complete duality – that is, you cannot tell whether the good god (Ahura Mazda) or the bad god (Ahriman) is going to win, so you better throw all your weight and influence on the side of the good god and help him win, or everyone is going to end up in Hell. Judaism has never thought that Satan is as strong as Yahweh. Yahweh is the Creator; Satan can only corrupt what is created. Nevertheless, Satan and the battle between Satan and God became much more prominent in Judaism after its contact with Zoroastrianism.

And as most of you remember, while Hebrew was the official language of Judaism, the language of the marketplace and the street in Jesus' time was Aramaic. As near as we can tell, Jesus spoke and taught in Aramaic most of the time, though He certainly could speak and read Hebrew and probably knew Greek. Why Aramaic? Aramaic was the official language of the Persian Empire. In Jesus' time, Alexander the Great had come and gone, and the Romans were in power. But Palestine still spoke Aramaic, the language of Cyrus.

Back to Ezra. You heard in today's Scripture reading from Nehemiah how hungry the people are to hear the reading of the Word. They are tired of the confusion, chaos, and jumble of unfounded opinions. But nobody has a Bible at home. There are no synagogues yet, and no public libraries. The only chance they have to hear the Word is at a public gathering where someone reads to them. You might find it hard to imagine at first, but they are eager and excited that Ezra has come. He is an expert in the Law, and the foremost teacher/priest of their time. So they gather eagerly on the Sabbath. Ezra reads to them for hours at a time. Then they break up into more manageable groups, and priests that Ezra has trained lead discussions and answer questions.

Ezra, I am convinced, does not know the maelstrom he is about to stir up. He is just trying to read and teach the Bible (as they know it). It's possible that you cannot identify with that as easily as I can. Ezra did not write the Torah; he is simply reading it. The community is listening with eager interest, and they *want* their Second Chance – they *want* to be faithful again. And the Torah has grown dim and vague because they have been living off of generalized memories of it. Now they are hearing it again as it was actually written. And as they listen, they are both excited and appalled. As the reading unfolds and the discussions proceed, they realize that they are not living by the Covenant in many, many ways.

It is important to realize that Ezra is no tyrant. He is not trying to judge the people with his own agenda or for his own purposes. Ezra does not come to the people demanding that they amend their ways. He reads and teaches and the people come to *him*, struggling and concerned by the discrepancies they are discovering between the way they live and what the Covenant requires. Remember that Judaism is a two-way Covenant: God's promises and purposes on the one side; the people's promise to obey the precepts of the Covenant on the other side. The two sides depend upon each other, and neither can be fulfilled without the other. Not only that, there is the perceived belief that the Babylonian Captivity – the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem – was a direct result of failing to keep the Covenant. In that regard, you might remember that “the punishment” was not regarded by everyone as the active anger of God. God simply withdrew the mantle of special protection. The Chosen People received special protection and a special destiny as long as they kept the Covenant. That was the deal. But if they did not keep the Covenant, then why should God treat them any differently from

anybody else? So the special “force field” of God’s protection was withdrawn, and they were exposed to the ebb and flow of life on earth just like everybody else. Nothing lasts here for very long; empires, companies, organizations, religions, individuals come and go at a great rate. That’s nothing new. No special punishment – just the loss of special protection.

So the people come to Ezra with many concerns. But the one that gets our particular attention – and it got theirs too – is the problem of intermarriage. For quite a few years (sixty to seventy), the returning exiles have been marrying the women of the land – the Samaritan women, and others. Reading the Torah has reminded everybody that this is supposed to be a holy nation, and that one of the great dangers is to dilute the Covenant Way with influences that have no intention of keeping the Covenant. One of the classic ways to do that is to marry women who have no intention of keeping the Covenant, and another way is to give your daughters in marriage to men who have no intention of keeping the Covenant.

When the elders of the people come to Ezra and tell him that intermarriage is widespread throughout the whole community, Ezra is stunned. From priests and Levites to the most common laborer, many men have married foreign wives. Ezra has no idea what to do. It was not his intention to bring up this problem. Reading the Torah aloud brought it to light. Ezra goes into prayer and fasting – sackcloth and ashes – waiting for some light to break. “Now what do we do? Oy veh!” Do you know the feeling?

Eventually they decide to do what most of you would decide to do: Get everybody together and have a big meeting. Attendance is mandatory. If you don’t come, you are no longer part of the community. The problem impacts everyone, and any solution they come up with will also impact everyone. So they don’t fool around: If you are part of us, come to the meeting.

They hold the big meeting, and the first thing is to get a clear picture of the situation. *Who* has married “foreign wives”? Over seventeen thousand of them have married foreign wives. Is that half of them? A third of them? We can guess, but at this point we don’t know the number of those in the community of returned exiles. Nevertheless, it is an easy place to get careless. The text goes into long lists of names and seemingly irrelevant details, so most readers skip over the lists and go on to where the story picks up again. If you read that way, you are left with the

impression that most of the community had married foreign wives. And that all of the foreign wives, with their children, were thrown out on the street to starve.

Actually, we are never told what happened to the women who were divorced or what happened to their children. Women at this time could own property and pass it on to whomever they chose. Did they go back to their families of origin? We don't know. And yes, the picture is very troublesome. But before we talk about the troublesome part, let's make sure we have the story straight.

At the big community meeting, it is clearly stated that this is a difficult problem, and that it will take considerable time to deal with. They set up a commission to look into each individual case. They interview each of the couples, and it takes two months. Now we need to know our traditions, or we cannot know what is really happening; the Book of Ezra is not going to reiterate the entire Torah. *Judaism has never had a problem with interracial marriage.* Joseph married the daughter of an Egyptian priest; Moses married a Cushite woman; Ruth was a Moabite woman. The issue for Judaism was *diluting the Covenant*. If you married somebody who wanted to keep the Covenant – no problem. In short, Judaism had no problem with conversion, only with those who might try to subvert or undo Judaism from within.

So what does the commission conclude? Out of the 4,630 priests and Levites who had married foreign wives, 27 of the marriages were found to be unacceptable. These 27 were not willing to live the Jewish Way. Out of the 12,455 laymen who had married foreign wives, 83 were found unwilling to live the Jewish Way. A total of 110 out of 17,085 marriages were found to be unacceptable. Just over half of one percent. What is the divorce rate in our communities today? Not half of one percent; more like fifty percent. So if you want to be angry at these zealous, unfeeling, compassionless, cruel, and brutal Jews, you might remember that they were still light-years ahead of us! And they may also have had far better reasons for their choices than some of the choices we make today, despite all our talk about “unconditional love.” Our own tiny congregation of 250 people represents more than 110 divorces. How sporting of us to jump all over Ezra's community of probably 60,000 to 70,000 for deciding that 110 of their marriages were not going to work.

But don't let me slough over important issues just because those ancient Jews were doing so much better with marriage than we modern Christians. As one commentary puts it: "How do we maintain the integrity of faith without excluding others?" The bare fact is, we do not. If we are afraid to be exclusive, we cannot maintain the integrity of the faith. How can you maintain the integrity of your love for your wife without excluding others? The truth is, you cannot. Well, all authentic faith is a love affair with God. Having affairs with other gods is called idolatry. To be faithful to your wife – or to be faithful to your God – is by definition exclusive. That is, faithfulness, at the very core of its meaning, is choosing what you will honor, serve, obey, cherish. And the reason faithfulness is so demanding – and rewarding – is because it requires us to unchoose anything and everything that dilutes, competes with, or distracts us from that which we have chosen.

You may suspect that I have forgotten that Jesus Himself did not choose the traditional "Purity Solution." One of the classic religious approaches is to form a select, isolated, private religious community, wall it off from outside influences, make the threshold of admittance high and guard it well, and then try to live a more and more perfect life inside the select community. On occasion, though not often, I am even accused of trying to do that here. But that is a thoughtless charge. We are a long way from a monastic community here, and our Covenant System admits anybody – and on their own terms, not ours.

In any case, there are marks of the traditional Purity Solution in the Pharisee Movement of ancient Judaism that I think grew out of the Babylonian Captivity period. The returning exiles were determined to be purer, more righteous, more obedient to Torah than any Jewish community had ever been before. They had been destroyed for being careless, and they were trying to learn from that. The more serious a community gets about being faithful, the more it tends to exclude those who do not want to be faithful. Some of you have a violent reaction to that; you hate anybody who doesn't love everybody. But I am always impressed by those who take their faith to heart and try to live it with great earnestness and devotion.

Still, I do remember Jesus. In the Judaism of His time, it was assumed that you should only eat with the righteous, and shun sinners until they cleaned up their act and did things correctly. However, Jesus ate with tax collectors, sinners, harlots, and outcasts of every description. But be careful! It was not license to join the sinners in their way of life.

It was a far more difficult WAY: Mingle with everyone, and still stay true to your own Way (His WAY). Do both at the same time. Be engaged – love and care – AND keep on living the New Life and inviting others into it. Could the requirements possibly be more difficult? It takes only a few moments to realize that this is not at all self-righteous – yet it will always be *accused* of being self-righteous.

The self-righteous feel superior; they separate themselves off. Followers of Jesus' WAY just feel grateful that there is a New Life – a better WAY – and that they themselves have been invited into it, however unworthy they are. And so they want it for others also, even if they too are unworthy. Nevertheless, they are conscious of having accepted the invitation – of wanting the New Life for themselves. They have ZERO desire to go back to their former ways! So the careless always mistake their humility and gratitude for self-righteousness. And that just has to be okay. Life is like that.

It seems to me that our best shot with whatever wisdom we can muster today is to stop being afraid of accusations about self-righteousness or exclusivity. They are compliments. In an age that stands for nothing – and wants no one else to stand for anything either – it is a compliment. And then from our side, we need to set things up so that people exclude *themselves* if they don't like the life we try to live. It must never be because of our unwillingness to live the life with anyone who wants it. But we need to keep being as clear as we can about what the Christian Path means, what it is like, and what it requires. We need to be clear about that, whether we are great examples of it or not. After all, we are being drawn into it more and more also. Following Jesus is about following Jesus – not about following us.

Therefore we have no right to change, minimize, or compromise Jesus' Way or Path on purpose. If a person has no real desire or intent to follow this Way, it should become more and more clear to them that they don't belong here or really wish to be involved here. That has nothing to do with how perfect they are on the Path. It has only to do with whether or not they really wish to walk this Way.

Which brings me to one final hint about the impact of Ezra and his story, at least on me. In our time, we are so worried about being accused of not caring, or of hurting somebody who wanted in and claimed they were rejected. Is that really the big issue in our time? I don't see thousands of people clamoring to get in here that we won't let in.

I see a culture mostly walking by the churches, completely uninterested, and the churches begging them to come in, trying to reassure them that if they do come in, they certainly won't find anything offensive – or meaningful or interesting or challenging – and, most assuredly, they won't find anything life-changing or threatening. The church keeps saying: “All are welcome. You are very, very welcome.” And the reply is: “Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. At best, you bore me.”

I think that's what happens when people no longer keep their Way – for themselves and each other. Or when they let it be diluted beyond recognition. We have tried to make Christianity “comfortable.” We have tried to turn the whirlwind of God into a soft, summer breeze. The Way is wonderful, but is it easy? Can you get safe, secure, comfortable, unchallenged ... and BE on the Christian Path at the same time? I am not talking about guilt for grave misdoings, though that is certainly an appropriate subject from time to time. I am talking about being unfocused, being otherwise occupied, being serious about other things but not about Christ or His Kingdom – never giving true attention to Jesus, His guidance, His ways, or His purpose or mission here.

Do you think most of the people of the church in our time go to sleep at night wondering what more they might do for Jesus – and awaken in the morning eager to be useful in some way, or at least faithful in whatever situations they find themselves that day?

That is not my impression of the vast majority of churches, or church members. It is surely true of pockets of them here and there, or we would not still be in business. But did Jesus die so we could be inattentive and half-hearted? And if we are excited or enthusiastic, is it about His Kingdom? Or is it about ball games, travels, fashion and fads (and you know the lists as well as I do)? When does Jesus get “our all”? When does Jesus get our full loyalty and support? I'm not talking about perfection, just – what do we call it? Loyalty and love.

I study the story of Ezra and the people around him, in that long-ago, far-off day. And I know it was a difficult, thrilling, frightening time for them, far more than words on a page can ever say. And maybe they were doing lots of things wrong, and certainly I know history well enough to know that what they started was not well-lived or honored by those who came after them. But I am overwhelmed by their intentions, by their passion, by how much they cared.

And I ask myself: How serious are WE?