

# BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

## Ezra Nehemiah Esther

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*People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).*

### Ezra Chapter Ten

#### *"The Dissolution Solution"*

##### Introduction

I want you to understand right away that our text is *not* about divorce. The word "divorce" is not used in this chapter. Some sources I checked say that the original Hebrew words are not the usual words to signify divorce.

Ezra was dealing with unlawful marriages. Passages of Scripture in Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7 absolutely prohibited marriages between Israelites and the unbelieving people of the nations surrounding Israel.

People who are found to be unlawfully married don't get a divorce; their marriage is voided or dissolved by some other legal means.

- being changed to bring change -  
What we are really talking about in Ezra ten is separation. I don't mean marital separation; I mean spiritual separation. The best way to understand spiritual separation is the classic definition that says a believer is in the world, but not of the world. Once you are saved, you are separated and set-apart to do God's will as you journey home to Heaven. You should avoid becoming entangled with things of the world that are unlawful to you as a Christian.

In Ezra's time, some of God's people had neglected their responsibility to remain separated from the world. They had entered into unlawful marriages. They were individually examined by God's Word to determine what they ought to do to return to a place of biblical separation.

**We can relate!** Occasionally we get too involved in things of the world. We neglect our responsibility to remain separated. We have God's Word to examine us and tell us what we ought to do to correct our disobedience and return to a place of separation.

Our text is about separation, and about searching our hearts to return to, and remain separated from, the world.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Get Separated From The World And You Have A Chance To Renew Your Hope, and #2 Get Searched By God's Word And You Have A Choice To Restore Your Heart.

#1 Get Separated From The World  
And You Have A Chance To Renew Your Hope  
(v1-11)

Ezra was teaching through God's Word. Either at Exodus 34, or Deuteronomy 7, the people he was teaching realized that some of their leaders were involved in unlawful marriages. In the last chapter, Ezra had wept and fasted and prayed. Now it was time to do something. But what?

Ezra 10:1 Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly.

Ezra 10:2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, "We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.

There are some important principles about separation to glean from Shechaniah's advice. First, he identified specifically, from God's Word, their sin. This is where all thoughts about separation must begin. What does the Word of God definitely say, or not say, about an activity?

Some separation activities are black-and-white. For example: You are not to engage in sexual activity before marriage. To do so is always sin for all Christians everywhere.

Some separation activities are not so black-and-white. Let me use my favorite example. The Bible does not prohibit, at all times, the drinking of alcoholic beverages. I wish it did; but it doesn't. It does say very clearly that drunkenness is always sin. As A Christian, it is not unlawful to drink; but if I am ever drunk, then I am in sin.

In order for me, personally, to remain separated from the world, I cannot drink alcohol at all. You might be able to drink it and remain separated – as long as you don't get drunk. By the way... I'm not sure what the Bible means, exactly, by being drunk. So those of you who drink, and get a little buzz... Are you drunk?

Separation from the world begins with a careful search of God's Word for things that are allowed and encouraged, and things that are disallowed and therefore discouraged.

Next Shechaniah said, [yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this](#). The people had sinned; but there was the hope of forgiveness and restoration. It's an important second principle. Any discussion of separation should be full of talk about forgiveness and restoration.

Having established those two principles, Shechaniah told Ezra what should be done:

[Ezra 10:3 Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.](#)

You need to realize that these unlawful marriages were happy marriages that produced children who were loved. It helps you to see just how radical was the solution to their unlawful marriages.

It's easier to remain separated than to sin and return to a place of separation. It can be costly to return. It can be costly emotionally... physically... even financially. Still, you cannot trifle with sin. If you are in sin, you must get out of it.

The last words of Shechaniah are a charge to Ezra:

Ezra 10:4 Arise, for *this* matter is your *responsibility*. We also *are* with you. Be of good courage, and do *it*.”

Ezra was not in sin; neither were those gathered to him. Nevertheless, they must get involved. They could not ignore the sins of others because their sins affected everyone.

A Christian assembly is charged with the responsibility to restore those who are in open, rebellious sin. I would note that the folks Ezra had to deal with were still among them. Often, in the Church, folks leave on their own. We should reach-out to them, to restore them; but we don't necessarily have to make their sin public.

Ezra began to act:

Ezra 10:5 Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath.

Ezra 10:6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and *when* he came there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity.

Ezra 10:7 And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem,

Ezra 10:8 and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the instructions of the leaders and elders, all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the assembly of those from the captivity.

The penalties seemed harsh, but they were perfectly suited to the situation. If a person did not want to remain separated from the world, he would be separated from God's people to go live in the world.

We are either separated for God, or we're not. We can't have it both ways.

Ezra 10:9 So all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth of the month; and all the people sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of *this* matter and because of heavy rain.

Ezra 10:10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel.

Ezra 10:11 Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives.”

Ezra’s actions are a good study in biblical confrontation:

1. First: He identified clearly their sin. It wasn’t a personality conflict, or some other inter-personal problem. It was sin.
2. Second: He related their sin as a problem for the entire assembly.
3. Third: He told them exactly what they must do to confess, repent, and be restored.

We will see the result in a moment. For now, I would point out that those who were in sin had a chance to repent, be restored, and return to a place of being separated. They had hope in spite of their sin.

God does not call certain things unlawful because He is old-fashioned or a cosmic killjoy. He does it because He knows the world will ruin you if you do not remain separated from it. Separation doesn’t keep you *from* something; it keeps you *for* Someone. It keeps you for Jesus, Who loves you with an everlasting love.

Even things that are not unlawful can be harmful. Why get involved in a questionable activity and risk it interfering with your relationship with Jesus?

## #2 Get Searched By God’s Word And You Have A Choice To Restore Your Heart (v12-44)

It was a dramatic moment... But it was raining! There was the practical matter of the weather to consider.

Ezra 10:12 Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, “Yes! As you have said, so we must do.

Ezra 10:13 But *there are* many people; *it is* the season for heavy rain, and we are not able to stand outside. Nor *is this* the work of one or two days, for *there are* many of us who have transgressed in this matter.

Ezra 10:14 Please, let the leaders of our entire assembly stand; and let all those in our cities who have taken pagan wives come at appointed times, together with

the elders and judges of their cities, until the fierce wrath of our God is turned away from us in this matter.”

Their answer was not a cop-out. They were not stalling. It was impractical, if not impossible, for this matter to be resolved all at once, because of the conditions they were experiencing.

When we confront someone who is in sin, there will be practical considerations. We ought to be willing to help them get out of their sin. We can't just rebuke them and leave them standing out in the rain!

Ezra 10:15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite gave them support.

Four guys opposed the plan. To his credit, Ezra ignored their opposition. It doesn't take too many guys to hinder God's work. Sometimes even one well-meaning dissenter can throw a wrench into doing what is called for.

Ezra 10:16 Then the descendants of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, *with certain heads of the fathers' households*, were set apart by the fathers' *households*, each of them by name; and they sat down on the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter.

Ezra 10:17 By the first day of the first month they finished *questioning* all the men who had taken pagan wives.

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One-by-one they examined the cases individually. It's a picture for us. One-by-one we are examined by God's Word when we sit down to read it, or hear it taught; or when God brings it to our remembrance. The Word of God searches us; then we have a choice to restore our hearts in any areas that need adjustment.

There is much to learn in God's Word. It is a book of theology; of history; of archaeology; of geology; of sociology; of proper psychology. It's full of prophecy. It uses poetry and prose and parables and psalms and proverbs.

All of that, and everything else that would fit into that kind of description, is only the foundation for the real intent of the Bible: To

reveal Jesus Christ to my heart so I can be changed moment-by-moment and day-by-day into His image.

- If I come to God's Word in a state of sin, having failed to separate myself from the world, it can search my heart to show me the love of my Savior. I see that I have hope in spite of my sin if I will confess, repent, and return.
- If I come to God's Word in a state of obedience, having separated myself from the world, it can search my heart to show me the love of my Savior. I see that I have hope in spite of the sufferings and tribulations I must endure as a Christian on my pilgrim journey home to Heaven.

The Word of God is always sent to my heart on a Search and Restore mission. Whether I am sinning or not, it inspires hope.

It comes down, though, to my choice:

- If I get searched and see that I have failed to stay separated from the world, it's my choice to do something about it. I can be like the majority of the men in this chapter; or I can be like the four who refused.
- If I get searched and see I am separated but struggling because of my situation and circumstances, it's my choice to have hope in spite of my very temporary experiences – looking forward to the return of the Lord for me.

The chapter ends with a listing of those who had taken pagan wives, but repented and separated themselves from them and their children by them. Nothing more is said of them.

We have a tendency to misunderstand the seriousness of these intermarriages. We might think of them as someone simply marrying a person from another ethnic background. You must realize that it wasn't just the marriages themselves. It was the influence of the pagan wives. This wasn't about racial purity; it was about religious purity.

The cultures these women came from were horribly decadent. They practiced child-sacrifice; they worshipped idols that were empowered

by demons; their religious rituals involved all manner of sexual perversions. It was these practices that made the marriages so dangerous and called for so radical a response. The pagan wives were leading their Jewish husbands into idolatry and perversion.

What happened after these marriages were dissolved? No one knows... But I'd like to suggest something. The same law that prohibited these marriages also had provisions for a person to proselyte and become a member of the Jewish congregation. Even though marriage to foreigners was unlawful, it was possible if the unbeliever converted. There are some notable examples in Israel's history:

1. Rahab was saved when Jericho was destroyed, and she married into the congregation.
2. So was Ruth, a woman from Moab. She was saved and then married into the congregation of Israel.

Perhaps these foreign wives in Ezra, or at least some of them, repented and returned to Israel as believers.

Even they had hope in spite of their sin!

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