



## BIBLE RADIO PRODUCTIONS

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BIBLE ADVENTURES SCRIPT:

**A1926 ~ Ezra Comes to Jerusalem.**

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*Welcome to Bible Adventures. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow. Jesus is Lord of all.*

In our recent *Bible Adventures*, we've seen the Jewish people from Judah under exile in Babylon for 70 years because of their disobedience and rebellion against God.

After the 1<sup>st</sup> group of Jewish exiles had returned to their country in 536BC, under Cyrus's decree and Zerubbabel's leadership, they found rebuilding the new Temple of God in Jerusalem as well as their homes difficult, even with the financial help of the rulers of the Persian Empire. The new Temple of God was smaller than the 1<sup>st</sup> one had been, and was eventually finished in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of King Darius, in 516 BC. It was consecrated the following year. But as time went by and a new generation arose, the people of Judah started drifting away from their devotion to God once again.

Back in Babylon, a scholarly priest named Ezra, who was a descendant of Zadok the priest from King Solomon's reign, became a godly teacher among the exiles still living there. In 458 BC, in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, Ezra obtained the King's permission to visit Jerusalem. He desired to check on the reports of the deteriorating religious conditions of the Jewish community in Judea.

Ezra led a team of about 1,800 men, not counting their women and children, who wanted to go back to Jerusalem. Even though they carried large amounts of silver, gold and precious utensils, they made the 4-month journey from Babylon without a military escort to demonstrate their trust in God's care.

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The Jewish teachings and Judeans' knowledge about the history of God's people under Law of Moses had been largely lost during their exile period in Babylon. Ezra, known as 'the Scribe', however, had this knowledge and travelled to Jerusalem to teach the people already living there.

In Deuteronomy, Chapter 7, Moses taught the Children of Israel that when they came into the Promised Land God was going to give them, they weren't to intermarry with the other tribes already living in the land. Moses also said that the Israelites weren't to make any treaties with those people, as they would lead the Israelites away from worshipping the One True God and instead, turn to idol gods. Moses continued, "You must break down their pagan altars and shatter their sacred pillars ... For you are a holy people, who belong to the Lord your God. Of all the people on earth, the Lord your God has chosen you to be His own special treasure."

Why was Ezra so upset when he learned of the Judeans' intermarriage with pagans occurring among the returned exiles in Jerusalem? Shouldn't he have expected as much? God had brought the exiles safely back to their own land, and they were still slaves under the king of Persia but God hadn't abandoned them. He'd caused the kings of Persia to show kindness to the exiles and the people were repaying God's love for them in a terrible way. They were disobeying His commands. Even the Temple priests and Levites were showing a bad example to the rest of the people. Idolatry was one of the sins that had resulted in the people of Judah being conquered by Babylon and taken there in the 1<sup>st</sup> place. Now that the people had returned to their Promised Land, they were again falling into the same sin.

God intended Israel to be a distinct and holy nation that was set in one location in the middle of an ungodly world. The Israelites were to be like the light of God to attract ungodly people to join them in their worship of Almighty God. This meant that they weren't to have any part in idol worship and the rule about no intermarrying with pagans was to keep them spiritually set apart and pure. Their own history showed that in marriage, it was much more likely for the unbelieving partner to pull the believer down than for the believing partner to lift the unbeliever up to God's important standards.

All the people should have remembered the trouble that was caused when King Solomon's heart was turned away from the Lord by the pagan women that he'd married while making peace agreements with other nations. As far back as Abraham's time, which was around 2,000 BC, even patriarch Abraham commanded his son Isaac not to marry a Canaanite woman.

In the Bible book of Ezra, Chapter 9, Ezra prayed to God, confessing his and the Judeans' sins, and asking God for His mercy. Ezra didn't act judgmentally or self-righteously towards the people. Instead, he identified with those who had sinned, even though he hadn't committed the same sin himself. Mixed marriages had become so commonplace by this point that this threatened the very survival of the distinctive Jewish community. Ezra told the people that after confessing their sin, they must undo their sin and make things right. Wherever possible in life, repentance must always be accompanied by restitution or making things right.

Ezra called for an assembly of the people in Jerusalem to bring about a religious revival. At that time, Nehemiah was governor of Jerusalem. Standing on a wooden platform built for the purpose, he read aloud a portion of the Law of Moses, which the Levites then translated from Hebrew to Aramaic for the people to understand. The people made a covenant to divorce their pagan, unbelieving wives and husbands. Anyone who refused to do so was to be separated from the community. Around that time, Ezra also recommenced the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, and it is probable that he died shortly after this. However, Ezra left a legacy of putting into order the correct manner of Judaism and is credited with writing the Bible books of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles and Ezra. Some scholars think that he wrote 1<sup>st</sup> Kings and 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles as well.

We can ask: was it ignorance of God's laws that lead the returned exiles to please themselves about their manner of living? Does God ever excuse people of ungodly behaviour on the basis of 'not knowing' the right way He wants people to live? In Hosea, Chapter 4, God brings His case against the northern kingdom of Israel, saying: "My people are being destroyed because they don't know Me ... Since you have forgotten the laws of your God, I will forget to bless your children. The more priests there are, the more they sin against me. They have exchanged the glory of God for the shame of idols."

When the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, came into the world, He brought a new covenant of God's grace that fulfilled and superseded the old covenant of the Law of Moses. Jesus' new covenant was a one-on-one relationship between Jesus and a person putting their faith in His complete sacrifice for their sin. A new believer in Jesus' new way to His Heavenly Father asks sinless Jesus for forgiveness of all their sin, both known and as yet unrecognized. The Lord Jesus, for His part, cleanses the person, makes their spirit new and gives His Holy Spirit to live in that person's life.

There's a lot to learn from the Bible in how Jesus directs a believer in Him to live each day in true fellowship. With regards to marriage, a Christian believer is warned not to marry anyone who isn't already a believer in Jesus too. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, Chapter 6, the Apostle Paul says: "Don't team up with those who are unbelievers ...What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever?" Christian believers should even be wary of dating a non-believer. This teaching to avoid being closely aligned with unbelievers also applies to business partners.

In the case of a person becoming a believer in Christ after their marriage, Paul says in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Chapter 7: "If a Christian woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to continue living with her, she must not leave him. A new believer is called to stay with an unbelieving spouse whenever possible to honour their marriage vows and remain loving to their spouse. However, if the unbelieving spouse abandons the relationship, the believing spouse is not to dispute the matter.

God's purpose for His people Israel in the Old Testament of the Bible was more restrictive than His purpose for the Christian church today. The faithful church has been dispersed throughout the world. Christians don't rely on the Law of Moses to keep them pure and undefiled; they rely on the saving grace of Jesus Christ and the living power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Although Christians must keep themselves spiritually pure, they don't do so by withdrawing into monasteries.

The whole process of the Jewish people separating from their foreign wives and husbands took three months and certainly didn't endear the Judeans to the other pagan people living in the land. If we're still troubled by the forced breaking up of families in this story, let us remember that such sorrow would have been avoided if the people had obeyed God's commandments in the first place. Sin always results, sooner or later, in pain and suffering. While we must reach out to such sufferers with love and sympathy, we must also keep in mind that their suffering, when caused by wilful sinning, could have been prevented.

The people who'd returned from exile in Babylon had drifted away from their distinctive position before God. Can we, today, also drift away from the specific teaching given to Christians in God's Word and through the Holy Spirit? And as there is an increasing presence of evil in public life than there was only 20 years ago, can Christians also drift away from our distinctive relationship with God? There are a number of things to consider: in Ephesians, Chapter 4, it says: "Live no longer as the Gentiles (or pagan, non-Jewish people) do, for they are hopelessly confused. Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against Him."

In Acts, Chapter 17, it says: "God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now He commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to Him." And in Romans, Chapter 1, it says: "God shows His anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because He has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God."

"Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship Him as God or even give Him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools." See how people who reject the Lord Jesus lose their ability to think clearly, as well as honestly and objectively!

Reforming a people group isn't easy! Even the great Ezra's campaign against intermarriage lasted only 25 years. Then Nehemiah had to come and do all the reform all over again. Nowadays, each succeeding generation needs be called to find salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ and trained to live in obedience to Him by the Holy Spirit's transforming work in the Christian's life. In Acts, Chapter 4, Verse 12, it says: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among people by which we must be saved [for God has provided the world no alternative for salvation]."

*The drama is from The Bible In Living Sound.*

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