

**“Soulmates or Cellmates”**

**Ezra 7-10**

*Series: Rising from the Ruins Week 3. Dedication*

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Since today’s Scripture focuses on marriage, here are a few quotes about marriage:

“When a man opens a car door for his wife, it’s either a new car or a new wife.” —Prince Philip

“Before you marry a person you should first make them use a computer with slow internet to see who they really are.” —Will Ferrell

“The best way to get most husbands to do something is to suggest that perhaps they’re too old to do it.”  
—Anne Bancroft – she was married to Mel Brooks who is 95

“Always get married in the morning. That way if it doesn’t work out, you haven’t wasted the whole day.”  
—Mickey Rooney – he was married 8 times

“A man doesn't know what happiness is until he's married. By then it's too late.” —Frank Sinatra

“We were married for better or worse. I couldn’t have done better and she couldn’t have done worse.” —  
Henry Youngman

“An archeologist is the best husband a woman can have. The older she gets, the more interested he is in her.”—Agatha Christie

“Marriage is a wonderful institution, but who wants to live in an institution?”—Groucho Marx

He should know. Groucho was divorced three times.

You might be surprised that today’s Scripture reading from Ezra doesn’t just recommend divorce – it commands it. If you are reading the daily Bible passages from Ezra with me it is shocking that a series on *Rising from the Ruins* talks about ruining marriage relationships. Stick with me on this and I hope, by the end of the message, to show you how God wants to build marriages up not tear them down. Let’s start with some background.

As we journey through the book of Ezra you may be wondering: “Where is Ezra?” He doesn’t show up in the book that bears his name until chapter 7. Chapters 1-6 covers the return of the first wave of Jewish exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. Led by Zerubbabel the Governor and Joshua the High Priest, their mission is rebuild the Altar and Temple. This takes about two decades. The slowdown is caused first by external opposition from the nations around Judah. There is also internal resistance from the Judeans who are more interested in building their houses than God’s House. The prophet Haggai says,

Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” Haggai 1:3-4

Paneling? The “ME” generation? Sounds like the 1970s. It was also true in Bible times. Finally with the help of Persian King Darius, the Temple is completed by 516 BC. Ezra doesn’t leave Babylon for Jerusalem for another 58 years. Just to put that in perspective, I’m 59. So who is Ezra?

After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok ... (8 more generations) ... the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. Ezra 7:1-6

Ezra is a priest descended from Aaron the first High Priest and brother of Moses. Although not the High Priest, Ezra is an expert teacher of the Law of Moses. His mission is to rebuild God's people. They are wandering from the Law, also called the Covenant. This is the constitution of their community, the foundation of their faith, the rock of their relationship with the Lord. After surviving 70 years in exile, after laboring another 80 years to rebuild the Temple and gain Jerusalem, they are about to lose their soul. How?

By marriage. Ezra receives this report:

The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness. Ezra 9:1-2

Ezra has a mild reaction to this news.

When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Ezra 9:3

He then throws himself down before the House of the Lord and offers up a prayer of confession for the nation. A large crowd gathers around the weeping priest. They are moved by Ezra's repentance on their behalf. Ultimately, Ezra issues this challenge:

"You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now honor the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives." The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: "You are right! We must do as you say." Ezra 10:10-12

So they divorce their foreign spouses and send them and their children away.

This doesn't seem right. It's harsh, even cruel. Today, we are trying to bring down the barriers and divisions between peoples, this builds them back up. Today, we are concerned about the abandonment of women and at-risk children, this adds to the problem. Is this God's will?

This is a case of Serious Problem, Extreme Solution. That's not my opinion. The Bible tells us so. Let's look first at the problem. Eighty years after they return from exile, God's people are once again in danger of losing their identity. There are many features which form your identity – finger prints, facial features, language, where you were born or grew up, where your ancestors are from. In the Bible the identity at stake is our spiritual identity. It's our unique relationship with one God, Yahweh, the Lord. The greatest temptation and threat to Israel's identity is always idolatry – falling in love with other gods. Moses warned them about idolatry, the prophets preached against idolatry, the exile was because of idolatry. The prophet Hosea called idolatry adultery because Israel was married to the Lord. So the problem is not the ethnic

background of the nations which surround them. It is their spiritual practices. Even Ezra makes this point in his prayer.

But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: ‘The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.’ Ezra 9:10-11

These detestable practices include idol worship, temple prostitution and child sacrifice. The other threat to their identity is they will blend in, assimilate and disappear just like the ten northern tribes.

I can see how this happened in my family. My Armenian Great Grandparents escaped persecution from Turkey in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When they came to this country, they lived, like many immigrant families, in a community of their own kind. They spoke Armenian, ate Armenian recipes, attended the Armenian Apostolic Church. In the next generation, my Grandparents were expected to marry an Armenian. They did. They had two children – one was my Mother. Yet they moved out of the Armenian community. They still spoke Armenian, ate Armenian recipes but were not near an Armenian church. They attended Episcopal or Presbyterian churches. My Mother married my Dad who was Swedish and Norwegian. We rarely ate Armenian recipes, could not speak or read Armenian and never went to the Armenian Church. Only now am I trying to recapture the heritage and history of my forbearers. None of this is wrong or sinful. Yet it shows how you can completely lose the identity of your ancestors in a few generations.

Ezra knows they are on the verge of losing their spiritual identity – their unique relationship with the One True and Only God. He also recognizes the principle way this happens is through the most basic building block of a community – marriage and the family. Marrying and raising families with the polytheistic nations around them are the surest ways to erase their identity. After fighting so hard to restore their relationship with God, Ezra’s not going to allow this to happen on his watch. Yet his solution to this serious problem is extreme: divorce and dismissal.

In trying to apply the Law of Moses, Ezra forgets Moses himself married a foreign wife (Exodus 2:21; Numbers 12:1) as did David (2 Samuel 3:3) and Solomon (I Kings 11:1; 14:21). He also overlooks the whole book of Ruth. This wife from Moab not only shows kindness to her Jewish family but becomes the great grandmother of King David. In the New Testament Jesus discourages divorce (Matthew 5:31-32) and Paul gives this counsel:

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. I Corinthians 7:12-14

So clearly, marrying someone of another nation is not the problem. The issue is keeping the faith. A relationship with the One True God is essential. Far from telling Christians to divorce unbelieving spouses, Paul recommends they seek to draw them into a loving relationship with Jesus. Ezra doesn’t realize the purpose of God’s special relationship with Israel is so He can have the same special relationship with people from all nations. God chose Abraham so “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). Jesus fulfills that promise by telling his disciples “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament show how the blessing spreads to the rest of the world and ultimately to us.

While we may not follow Ezra's extreme solution, there is still a serious issue: is your Marriage and Family founded on Faith in Jesus Christ? Jesus says,

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. Matthew 7:24-25

All marriages and families have faced a lot of storms during these months of pandemic and lockdown. The pressure Covid puts on your marriage or family opens up the hidden fissures and hairline cracks in your relationships. All this quarantine and isolation can bring you together or drive you apart. How do you use this time to become soulmates rather than cellmates?

**Grow in Your Love for the Lord.** Ezra was an expert in the commandments. The most important commandment of all is:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Mark 12:30; Deuteronomy 6:4-5

To work on your relationship with your spouse or children, start by growing in your love for the Lord. The more you fall in love with the Lord, the more of His love will flow through you to those in your life. The first commandment tells us to love Jesus with our whole being.

- Love God with your heart – spend time praying each morning and throughout the day telling the Lord how much you love Him.
- Love God with all your soul – fill your life with the Holy Spirit and do not let any idol take God's throne in your soul
- Love God with all your mind – study God's Word alone, with your family, with other believers
- Love God with all your strength – Use your energy, gifts and time in a way that pleases and praises the Lord.

**Serve Your Spouse.** The second commandment says:

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:39-40

Clearly the closest neighbor to you is the one who lives in your house. Love starts at home. And love must be more than words or an occasional gift. In a healthy marriage both partners lift the other up, serve the other, selflessly place the other above themselves. This is why Paul says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21) Notice – this must be mutual to truly work. It can't be one serving and the other being served.

"Marriage is not just spiritual communion and passionate embraces; marriage is also three meals a day and remembering to carry the trash out." —Joyce Brothers

"The most important four words for a successful marriage: 'I'll do the dishes.'"—Anonymous

These small daily acts of love and service are the salt which season and flavor a marriage.

It's hard to love this way if you don't first grow in your love for the Lord. When I do premarital counseling with couples I draw a picture of a triangle with the couple at the base and the Lord at the top. Then I point out that as both partners move up the triangle closer to the Lord they naturally draw closer to each other. This is not magic. The more you realize how much you are forgiven, the more you are filled

with grace, the more you receive the selfless love of Jesus, the more forgiveness, grace and love you are able to give. Try practicing an act of selfless service to your spouse and family members each day this week.

Finally, **Share Your Faith with Your Children.** Paul adds,

Parents do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Ephesians 6:4

Ezra fears the faith will end with his generation. That reality is still true today. It's no secret that many young people are turning away from faith in Jesus or anything. Distracted by all that comes through their phones, they are being trained and instructed by the culture. I know it's been difficult to bring your children and teens to Faithful Families, Faithful Clubz, Fusion and Ignite because of Covid. Yet Faith is supposed to be passed on in the Family Circle. The primary role of sharing the Faith belongs with the Parents. We give you tools like Bibles, Right Now Media and online lessons as well as Kid and Youth Ministries here at Woodside. I will offer a meeting about Baptism this Wednesday. Yet the best job is done when the family makes it a regular practice to read the Bible at Breakfast or Bedtime, pray daily, serve others, and worship together in person or online. Smart phones can become idols. Make a point to turn them off and talk, pray, serve and love each other.

Last September I attended a funeral service for a dear saint – Richard Bozarth, the father of Woodside member Brian Bozarth. Richard was a carpenter by trade so he knew a thing or two about construction. As I listened to the messages from his family members and pastor I learned that his 61 year marriage to his beloved wife Jean and his family were solidly built on the Rock of Jesus Christ. He constantly shared the Scriptures with his children, grandchildren, fellow church members, coworkers and neighbors. He wanted to make sure the faith passed on to the next generation and the next. Richard's hope and prayer is that everyone would come to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior even at his funeral. Several times during the service they played a video of Richard Bozarth asking one simple question: "Have you told the Lord Jesus you love Him today?"