

Chapter 58 Ezra 6-19

Ezra and the Second Exodus

“ . . . The Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.” Ezra 9:8-9

The process of repopulating, rebuilding, and renewing the covenant people of God in the promised land took place over an extended period of time. The return of the exiles to Jerusalem was staggered over decades, beginning with Haggai and Zechariah (ca 520 B.C) and continuing with Ezra's return in 458 B.C. and Nehemiah's in 445 B.C. The first six chapters of the book of Ezra covers the period from 539 BC to 520 BC. Chapter seven picks up the story fifty-seven years later with Ezra's prominent role. We don't know whether Ezra ever met Esther and Mordecai, but he must have known about them. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem sixteen years after the defeat of Haman's edict of annihilation (474 B.C.) and Mordecai's rise to power. He preceded Nehemiah's first visit to Jerusalem by thirteen years.

Ezra worked with Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem not only with brick and mortar, but with devotion and obedience. They were contemporaries, but their leadership styles and strategies appear to differ. We are curious about their relationship. We would like to know how they got along, but the narrator doesn't explore the personal human interest side of the story. The focus remains on the larger issues of rebuilding the temple, repopulating the land, and renewing the people of God. For the followers of Christ, the real story remains how the covenant-keeping God of Abraham, Moses and David, prepared the world for the coming of the Messiah, the Incarnate One. The stories and lists that make up the books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue to describe the path of humility that leads to Bethlehem and the Cross. All the mundane details and moral dynamics of this period contribute to our understanding of God's seemingly slow moving, yet ever unfolding salvation story.

The first exodus was a massive movement of people led by Moses, fed by manna and guided by a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. The Law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai and God's judgment against the opposition was swift and hard. The first exodus was marked by the miraculous at every turn, but there is little evidence of the miraculous during the second exodus even though there were many instances of answered prayer. Both movements were very much of God but one was miraculous and the other mundane.

Pity the post-exilic returnee who prayed for plagues against the opposition and looked for manna from heaven and water from a rock. Those who longed for the outward display of the miraculous would have been sadly disappointed. Undoubtedly Ezra and Nehemiah believed it was miraculous when the Lord worked in the heart of the Persian king to grant them permission to

return to Jerusalem with resources to rebuild, but it wasn't like the miracles God performed through Moses before Pharaoh. The paradigm shift from the first exodus to the second exodus may parallel the change that takes place in the book of Acts. The outpouring of Pentecostal power described at the beginning of the early church is very different from the on-going advance of the gospel portrayed at the end of the book of Acts. The power of the Holy Spirit remains evident, but not in the same way as at the beginning. Little is said about large numbers of people coming to Christ. Paul is under house arrest and the churches continue to struggle. Judging from Acts, the advance of the Church is more of a matter of patience and perseverance than miraculous outpourings of Pentecostal success. For most of us our experience of discipleship and church growth is more like the second exodus than the first. The remnant in the land is like the church in the world. We struggle on two fronts, against outside opposition on the one hand and internal disobedience on the other.

Another big difference between the first exodus and the second was political. The central reality of the first exodus was the theocratic rule of Yahweh. Moses was not thought of as a king but as a leader appointed by God to communicate and apply the rule of God to the people of God. The law was holy and embraced the totality of life. The central reality of the second exodus was the autocratic rule of the Persian king, Artaxerxes I. He ruled during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah from 464-424 B.C. He was the son and successor of Xerxes I (also known as Ahasuerus in Ezra 4:6) who made Esther his queen and elevated Mordecai to prominence. From the time of the Babylonian captivity right down to the present age, the people of God have always been subject to political regimes which, to a greater or lesser extent, have been hostile to the rule of God. The pattern of a secular ruler holding political power over the people of God was part of the trajectory of humility that led up to the birth of Christ. Jesus was born in the days of Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great and in the end he was sentenced to die by the Roman governor Pilate. The apostles and the early church constantly struggled against political authorities that threatened to thwart the advance of the gospel. After all these centuries Christians should not be surprised that the church prevails in spite of being politically submissive and subversive to the modern day equivalents of Xerxes or Artaxerxes or Pilate or Caesar. Today, as in Ezra's day, God is in control regardless of those who wield political power.

In the letter quoted at length (7:12-26) authorizing Ezra's journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, Artaxerxes gave himself the title "king of kings." On one level such a designation may have struck Ezra as arrogant if not blasphemous, but on another level it simply indicated the practical realities of the day. It is doubtful whether Ezra would have entertained any notion of returning to Jerusalem without the king's permission. He saw himself and all the Jews as "slaves" under Artaxerxes but not forsaken by their God (9:9). Ezra had little recourse but to be "subject to the governing authorities," however he also believed, along with the apostle Paul, that there was "no authority except that which God has established" (Rom 13:1). Since Ezra was constrained to go through the proper channels, he prayed to the sovereign Lord of Heaven, the one and only King of kings and Lord of lords, for success with Artaxerxes, a little king of kings. Ezra had to respect two spheres of authority and he had to distinguish between the law of God and the law of the king (7:26). He was well trained in the Word of God to understand the boundary lines between church and state. Ezra and Nehemiah are good examples of the principle practiced by Jesus:

“give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Lk 20:25). However, there was no doubt in their mind that Yahweh was sovereign over all, “for from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom 11:36).

A Second Moses

Nehemiah spent three months praying and fasting, in spiritual and emotional anguish for the Jerusalem refugees, waiting for the right moment to approach Artaxerxes. But there is no description of the circumstances that led to Ezra’s return to Jerusalem nor how he obtained permission from the Persian King. What we do know is that Ezra’s success is described succinctly and credited entirely to the Lord, “The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord was on him” (7:6). What was more important to the narrator was Ezra’s priestly heritage, which he traced in detail all the way back to Aaron. The narrator emphasizes Ezra’s devotion, study and observance of the Law of the Lord and skips over Ezra’s 900 mile, four month journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (7:8). Details of the journey come later in the story, but first and foremost, the narrator stresses that Ezra was a devoted biblical scholar, an effective biblical teacher and “a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the Lord for Israel” (7:11). “He is a model reformer,” writes Derrick Kidner, “in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in Scripture. With study, conduct, and teaching put deliberately in the right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness.”

Judging from the narrator’s description of Ezra’s qualifications we cannot overestimate the importance of the Word of God for shaping the biblical community. Yet this tends to be the most obvious missing element in church and mission work today. Books on leadership stress innovation and vision. They focus the importance of keeping up with a changing culture and staying relevant. In theory Christian leaders believe in the Bible but in practice they turn to the world to learn how to run an organization, raise funds, market their product, and influence people. Their message may come out of the Bible, but their method comes out of the world. They are in the habit of doing the Lord’s work in the world’s way.

Is there a job description in today’s church that fits Ezra’s role? He was called, gifted, and trained to study, teach, and apply the word of God, but if Ezra were alive today would believers want what he had to give? If Ezra were living today he would be asked to sit on Christian ministry boards, not because he knew the Word of God and was skilled in applying it, but because of his powerful connection to Artaxerxes. Christian organizations network with church leaders for the purpose of raising funds within their congregations, not receiving wisdom from the Word of God. Most American run Christian organizations feel they already know everything they need to know about the Bible. What they really need is money to launch their marketing campaign or execute their long-range vision. If the Bible only defines the message and the world defines the method and the means, the Christian community will have little need of people like Ezra. And if the world defines the method and the means, in no time, the world will also define the message.

Those who are called, gifted and trained like Ezra are increasingly marginalized in the American church for a variety of practical reasons. The Christian culture in America values style over substance, entertainment over education, youth over age, felt needs over spiritual needs, and ease over effort. We expect to learn whatever we need to know with as little work as possible. For that reason we don't read and study, even though we have tremendous resources available. The onus is on the communicator to make the message personable, entertaining, practical, and easy to understand. Today's church and pastors' conferences are part trade show, part pep rally, part paid vacation. New methods provide the inspiration and excitement for doing ministry. Pastors will pay hundreds of dollars to watch a satellite feed of a famous pastor or consultant on a video screen to find out the latest trends and techniques to reach the postmodern generation.

The old fashioned Bible conference led by a Bible expositor has become a thing of the past. In the summer of 1936, John Sung, one of China's most famous evangelists, held a Bible conference for one month in southern China in the middle of a hot and humid summer. He studied the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation with 1600 delegates. At the final session John Sung said, "Within one month the Lord has enabled us to study the Bible book by book, and now this Bible is yours to take home with you. I have but given you a sort of key and you must go on studying for yourselves. . . During these thirty days I have trembled before the Lord, that I might rightly expound to you the Word of God" (Leslie T. Lyall, John Sung, Moody Press, 1964, 110). The kind of conference that John Sung led in 1936 is so far removed from the today's Christian temperament as to be almost unimaginable. Why have we substituted method over message and focused our efforts on the means as opposed to the meaning? Have we become bored with the Word of God?

Artaxerxes' decree granted permission for Ezra to go to Jerusalem, along with any Israelites who volunteered to go with him. He was authorized to bring funds for the temple, which were given by the king and his advisers, along with the freewill offerings given by the Jews. The King also made provisions for the temple out of the tax revenue raised in the provinces west of the Euphrates. We do not have to look far to find the reason for Artaxerxes' generosity. What better way to assure protection and avert disaster than to placate the God of heaven. Artaxerxes reasoned that if he did all this for the God of heaven "why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons?" (7:23).

At the beginning and at the end of the decree a second and more complicated authorization was given. Ezra was commissioned "to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand" (7:14). Finances were very important and material resources were drawn from several sources, but of even greater importance was the role that the Law of the Lord served in identifying and defining the people of God. In all likelihood it was Ezra himself who convinced the king of this need. Funding without faithfulness was of little benefit to the people of God. And the key resource for determining faithfulness, the Law of the Lord, was not difficult to find, it was right there at Ezra's disposal. What Ezra really needed to strengthen the people of God was not in the royal treasury, but in his hands.

Keep in mind that Artaxerxes, the pagan Persian King, designated Ezra, “a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses” (7:6), to be in charge of a full range of practical social and political issues. There was no artificial division between belief and practice. Artaxerxes’ decree was based on an assumption, often denied by well-meaning Christians, that the Word of God applied as much to the organizational life of the community as it did to the spiritual life of the people. There was no secular/spiritual divide.

Ezra was tasked with the responsibility of teaching and applying the Word of God to the life of God’s people. This meant selecting leaders who were able to administer justice to all the people according to the law. Artaxerxes even authorized strict punishment for disobedience (7:25-26). The challenge confronting Ezra and the remnant was not primarily funding but faithfulness to the revelation of God. The rest of the book of Ezra illustrates how Ezra applied the Word of God to recruiting worship leaders, personal security, financial integrity and spiritual authenticity. It would have been possible for the Jerusalem temple and the city walls to have been rebuilt and the religious rituals observed without the Word of God and the leadership of Ezra. In fact the Jews might have become a thriving commercial community and well-liked among their neighbors if obedience to the Law of the Lord had been optional. But success without faithfulness can lead only to failure. Ezra was responsible for studying, teaching and applying the Word of God within the biblical community. His task appeared not only impractical and inconvenient, but at times it must have seemed hopeless.

His benediction before setting out for Jerusalem reveals a self-effacing, grateful leader who was not only quick to praise the Lord but to trust in the Lord (7:27-28). The narrator lists the returning exiles by families without exploring the reasons or their motivations for undertaking such a long arduous desert journey. The whole caravan, including women and children may have numbered around 5,000 (Williamson, 110). The fact that there were no Levites in this large group would indicate that many were unwilling to leave Babylon and relocate to Jerusalem. At the Ahava Canal, Ezra discovered this deficiency of priests and ordered a delegation sent out to recruit Levites. Numbers alone did not satisfy Ezra or his understanding of what was needed. To his credit he was unwilling to return without the necessary personnel for taking care of the house of God. Ezra reports that the recruiting delegation was successful “because the gracious hand of our God was on us” (8:18).

Everything Ezra did in preparation for the journey can be traced back to the word of God. He recruited Levites, called for a period of fasting and prayer, and appointed priests to guard the valuable temple articles and freewill offerings. Ezra’s leadership in these practical decisions helped to define the meaning of the journey. This was not a freedom march or an adventure for free-spirited individuals. This was a pilgrimage—a faith journey undertaken with God’s provision and God’s protection. There was one particular aspect of the journey and leadership decision that Ezra appears to have struggled over. He explained, “I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, ‘The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him’” (8:22). Thirteen years later Nehemiah will accept a military escort, but Ezra in 458 BC felt constrained by the boldness of his own testimony before the king to depend

exclusively on the Lord's protection. We should not be surprised that the journey came to a climax four months later in Jerusalem in a worship service with burnt offerings and great thanksgiving.

Ezra's Disgrace

There are leaders of convenience and leaders of commitment. Ezra is a clear example of the latter. Four months after arriving in Jerusalem, Ezra was confronted publicly with a crisis that had likely been troubling the community for some time (7:9; 10:9). Perhaps, Ezra's faithful teaching of the Word of God had provided the motivation and the understanding to finally confront this problem that threatened to undermine everything that Ezra and the biblical community had stood for and Ezra worked for. A delegation of leaders came to Ezra and laid out the problem:

“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” (9:1-2).

The heart of the complaint lies in the admission that the people of Israel had conformed to the detestable practices of the neighboring peoples. Their identity as a holy people had been compromised by intermarriage. But the issue was not foreign wives as such. Abraham, Joseph and Moses had foreign wives, but in each of these marriages the testimony of Yahweh prevailed. In the genealogy of Jesus four women of apparent Gentile ancestry are listed: Tamar of Canaan, Rahab of Jericho, Ruth the Moabite and the ex-wife of Uriah the Hittite” (Keener, 54). By the mercy of God, all four Gentile women were included in the Abrahamic covenant. Canaanite Tamar was included in spite of her father-in-law Judah's despicable behavior toward her (Genesis 38). Rahab, the Jericho prostitute, was included because she believed in the power of Yahweh and hid the Israelite spies (Joshua 2). Even Ruth the great grandmother of David was foreign born yet included in the people of the promise. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, are included in the family tree because of God's promise to Abraham, “through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed” (Gen 22:18).

The mandate following the first exodus was to take possession of the land and destroy the Canaanite inhabitants (Exodus 34:11-16), but there was no such mandate following the second exodus. Faithfulness rather than fighting was the key to maintaining the holy identity of the people of God. However blatant disobedience followed both the first exodus and the second exodus jeopardizing the integrity and authenticity of the people of God. Like their ancestors the post exilic remnant “mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, who they sacrificed to the idols

of Canaan, and the land was desecrated with blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves” (Ps 106:35-39).

Haman, the Jewish-hating prime minister under Xerxes, had found the Jewish insistence on remaining separate grounds for genocide. He condemned them for their different customs (Esther 3:8). But now, sixteen years later, the distinctive identity of the people of God was being lost by Israel’s relational and marital ties with the surrounding cultures. The people of God absorbed their foreign life styles and detestable practices not because of coercion and outside pressure, but because of internal pressure and free choice. Undoubtedly it was argued by even some of the priests and Levites that intermarriage was good for cooperation, commerce, and tolerance. They reasoned that intermarriage helped to repopulate the region and build bridges between cultures.

The remnant faced a crisis of biblical interpretation: if they were no longer commanded to drive out the nations, were they free to intermarry with the surrounding nations? Rightly dividing the word of truth meant understanding what part of the Law no longer applied and what part of the Law remained in force. The danger of Israel losing her identity as the people of God must have prompted the concern of the leaders and the preaching of Ezra. In this case, the skilled biblical expositor separated the military mandate from the prohibition against intermarriage. Ezra would have preached a text such as Deuteronomy 7 with boldness: “Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you” (Deut 7:3-4).

The relational pressure that threatened to destroy the authenticity of the remnant remains a threat to the church today. As it was with the returning exiles so it is with the church today. Our weakest link is friendship and marriage. Sexuality and all of its related concerns has become our number one challenge. This is where our spirituality and witness are being tested and Christian discipleship is being challenged. We are confused about what it means to follow Christ into friendships and marriage. We are becoming increasingly aware of the battle for the soul being waged in our culture. Straightforward biblical admonitions such as the apostle Peter’s, “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul,” seem to have about the same moral power among Christians as the warning label on a pack of cigarettes for smokers (1 Pet 2:11). How can we obey Jesus’ command to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him (Lk 9:23), and marry someone who has no interest in following Jesus? I am not speaking here to a person who has come to Christ after being married but to a believer who chooses to ignore their devotion to God and marry a person without faith in Christ or only a nominal faith in Christ.

The apostle Paul proved his love for the unbeliever by risking his life to share the gospel. As he said, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22). But when it came to marriage and soul-identifying partnerships of any kind, Paul was unequivocal, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? . . . Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor 6:14-15). Today’s ready acceptance of

mixed marriages, with one spouse a believer and the other not, is a sad reflection of the church's false humility and weakness. At a critical time we bow before the pressure of the world and validate the world's agenda over the authority of the Word of God. If in Christ we are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession," how can we through marriage "mingle the holy race" with those who refuse to be committed to Christ (1 Peter 2:9; Ezra 9:2)?

When Ezra heard the leaders' confession, he reacted so dramatically and publicly that he got everyone's attention. Our first tendency when confronted by a situation produced by moral compromise, convenience and expediency is to cover it up and make light of it. Ezra did the opposite. He tore his tunic and cloak, pulled hair from his head and beard and sat down appalled. Those "who trembled at the words of the God of Israel" gathered around him. As the circle around Ezra expanded the realization that this was defining moment for the people of God must have grown. Ezra remained in mourning until the evening sacrifice, 3:00 PM, known as "the hour of prayer" (Acts 3:1). Then he rose from his "self-abasement" with his tunic and cloak torn, and he fell on his knees with his hands spread out to the Lord his God and he prayed.

Ezra's prayer of confession serves as a model for our own confession. He entered into the grief of the people's sin as if it were his own. If he had begun his prayer by saying, "I too am ashamed and disgraced, my God," he would have acted as if the people had sinned against him and the Lord. He would have been identifying with the righteousness of God rather than the sinfulness of his people, but instead he began, "I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God to lift my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens" (9:6). Ezra felt overwhelmed by a flood of sin and guilt that had accumulated through the generations and led to their "humiliation at the hand of foreign kings."

Ezra was well aware that this was a unique moment in salvation history. Once again God had given Israel a window of opportunity. In spite of their history of moral failure and spiritual compromise there was hope. Ezra prayed, "But now, for a brief moment, the Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage" (9:8). Ezra admitted however that this great opportunity stood in peril. "But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands you gave through your servants the prophets" (9:10). He then summarized the message of the prophets against the detestable practices of the surrounding cultures and the dangers of intermarriage. He made it very clear that they had no grounds for blaming God. There was no hint of being disappointed with God. On the contrary, God had every right to destroy them completely. Ezra concluded, "Lord, the God of Israel, you are righteous!" which is to say, "You are right!"

The apostle John's admonition to the believers at Ephesus is in the tradition of Ezra: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, love for the Father is not in you. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful people, the lust of their eyes and their boasting about what they have and do—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever" (1 Jn 2:15-17).

To use Ezra's words, I think we can say with the apostle John and say, "You are right!" Ezra did his part. He led the people in preaching and confession but he did not impose a solution on them. The conviction to separate from surrounding cultures and send away "all these women and their children" came from other leaders. The leadership admitted that many had been "unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women" and they sought to right the wrong. There was no way around this issue apart from deep pain and grief. But unless they wanted to become like Solomon, who was led into pagan practices by his foreign wives (1 Kings 11:8) they had to act decisively. A proclamation was issued and all the people gathered on the 20th day of the ninth month, Kislev, which approximates our December (Williamson, 155). It must have been an incredibly depressing scene as thousands gathered in the cold and rain. They sat in the square before the house of God and confessed their sin. The collective voice of the assembly agreed with the indictment and the painful solution. But the situation was too complicated to decide there and then in the rain. They were willing to let their officials act on their behalf and deliberate each case.

Four men opposed this decision, but we don't know whether they objected to the proposed solution of divorce or the process of deliberation. The fact that Meshullam and Shabbethai are listed as staunch supporters of Ezra (Neh 8:4,7) may indicate that they wanted more immediate intervention and resolution. In any case, the proposed representative process was enacted and Ezra selected and delegated leaders from each family division to try each case. The commission worked for three months to determine that 111 families (17 priests, 6 Levites, 1 singer, 3 gatekeepers, and 84 others) were involved. The lengthy period of deliberation might indicate that the commission was not simply tracing ethnicity but determining whether a foreign spouse had made a genuine conversion to the biblical community or persisted in maintaining her cultural identity and religion. The pain and anguish of separating families was the lesser of two evils. It helped reverse the sinful decision to marry outside the community of faith and it served to protect Israel from moral and spiritual corruption.

In similar cases today where Christians knowingly marry unbelievers the New Testament explicitly rules out divorce. The apostle Paul would have had a hard time understanding why a believer would marry an unbeliever, as he said, "What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Cor 6:15). Nevertheless his counsel is clear, "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" (1 Cor 7:12-13). Paul follows the spiritual direction of Jesus by respecting the permanency of the marriage union and by treating each gender equally. Initiating a divorce is the prerogative of the unbeliever, not the believer. If the unbeliever desires to remain married to the Christian spouse, they should remain married. Paul sees great redemptive advantage to this for the sake of the unbelieving spouse and their children. He assumes that the believing spouse will have a powerful impact for Christ on the entire family (1 Cor 7:14). The apostle Peter shared Paul's perspective and wrote about unbelieving husbands being "won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of [their] lives" (1 Peter 3:1-2). But if the unbelieving spouse wants out of the marriage, Paul advises the believing spouse to allow it. "A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace"

(7:15). The working conviction in both the Old and New Testaments is that the unbelieving spouse must not endanger the believing spouse's faith and commitment to God.

The book of Esther tells the story of how God intervened through Esther and Mordecai to save his people from state-sponsored genocide. The book of Ezra tells the story of how God intervened through his servant Ezra to reverse the moral compromise and spiritual pollution from inside the community in order to save his people. Both principles of God's sovereign protection remain in effect for the followers of Jesus Christ. We are comforted by the truth that greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world (1 Jn 4:4). Therefore we rely on Jesus' promise of assurance, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). From another angle however, we are challenged with our responsibility to be authentic followers of Christ. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness. . . it is good for nothing. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden" (Mt 5:13-14). The challenge to stay in the story requires both dimensions: God's providential protection and the perseverance of the saints.