

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **God's View of Divorce, Part 1**

Scripture: Matthew 19:7-9

Code: 90-231

Well, let's turn in our Bibles back to Genesis chapter 2. I do have an awful lot to say to you and much of the time is gone and we'll just kind of see how it goes. This is a very important subject that we are dealing with as we go through our study of origins in the book of Genesis. We have gone through chapter 1 and discussed the details of the six-day creation of the universe, as it now exists, with the later addition of the flood that comes in Genesis 6. And then chapter 2 the attention of Moses, who is the author of the Pentateuch including the book of Genesis, the attention is focused on man. You have the creation of everything in chapter 1. But starting in chapter 2, verse 4 the focus is on man.

And as Genesis unfolds the history of origins, obviously the main issue is the story of man. Man is the one person in creation made in the image of God, designed for redemption. And so starting in chapter 2, verse 4 begins the saga of man. And it is a story that ends only at the end of all history. All of history is the story of man. And it finally will conclude when the events described at the end of the book of Revelation take place and God creates a new Heaven and a new earth, the eternal state at which point all of history is past.

As we have looked at the story of man in chapter 2 we have seen the creation of man in verses 4 to 7. We have seen the location of man in verses 8 to 14 in the Garden called Eden. We have seen the vocation of man in that same section, verse 15, God took the man, put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it. We have seen the probation of man; God commanded him, in verses 16 and 17, to eat from anything except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And then we come, in verses 18 to 25, to the relation of man.

One of the features of man being created in God's image was his capacity for relationship. And that relationship, basically, at its basic point of definition is a relationship between a man and his wife. Back in chapter 1 verse 26 when the brief statement of the creation of man is given. It says, "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image according to our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' And God created man in His own image, in the image of God, He created him, male and female He created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'"

When we come to the section before us, at the end of chapter 2, we have details of the creation of man and woman. Verse 18, expanding what was said in chapter 1, giving us more detail, says that

when God created man and woman it went like this: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. So I'll make a helper suitable for him.' And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky and brought them to the man to see what he call them. And whatever the man called the living creature that was its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him."

When God man early on the sixth day, God then paraded in front of man all the animals. And gave man the opportunity to recognize them which in his wonderful mental capacity which would be unknown to any of us who are subject to fallenness and sin, he was able to determine some distinguishing characteristic about all of that parade of animals and give them a suitable name associated with that distinction. But the idea was to parade everything that was made in front of man to show him that none of that provided a suitable companion for him and certainly didn't provide anyone with whom he could procreate.

"So God," verse 21, "caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man. And he slept. And He took out of his side," literally in the Hebrew, "and then closed up the flesh at that place. And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the side, which He had taken from the man. And brought her to the man and the man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be woman because she was taken out of man.'"

So God creates man, shows him there's no suitable helper in all the created world. Then God puts him to sleep, the first anesthesiologist and the first surgeon. God puts him to sleep and then takes a part of his side. And out of his side He creates woman. And then God defines marriage in verse 24. "For this cause," for this reason, because it is the created order, "a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife. And they shall become one flesh."

So God, in creating man and woman as the first created beings, on the sixth day in the original creation, also defines for us marriage. And marriage is one man, one woman coming together to create a unique identity, all its own, for life. Defined as becoming one flesh. A man and a woman becoming one in a bond that lasts for life, that is marriage. And that is God's design for the procreation of the race. It is that that makes possible, verse 28 of chapter 1, "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."

And as I said to you last time, God doesn't care about the relationships of animals because they don't have relationships. They come together and procreate without relationships. But with man and woman God has designed procreation to occur between one man and one woman for life. And this is the foundational and most fulfilling relationship in all of human life. It is marriage. And Peter calls it the grace of life. One man, one woman clinging together for life, this is the best provision to ensure personal fulfillment, personal richness, well-structured families, and prosperity in society. And, as

marriages go, so personal fulfillment goes, and so goes society.

Now since God has designed marriage the Bible tells us God hates divorce. That's what it says in Malachi 2:16, "I hate divorce," quoting God. And as Christians we should also hate divorce because it destroys the perfect design of God for marriage. We also have to realize however that we live in a fallen world. The reality is in a fallen world divorce does exist. But I remind you that any divorce falls short of God's ideal. The question is: Is it ever allowable, is it ever acceptable to God to go through a divorce, to be divorced? We know it's not the ideal. We know God hates it. But it is a reality. The question is: How does God view it?

And to answer that I want you to go with me to Matthew chapter 19 where we left off last time. Because in Matthew chapter 19 Jesus, who is God in human flesh, answers the question: How does God view divorce? Now in chapter 19 the Pharisees in verse 3, and this is a little review. The Pharisees come to Jesus and they test Him and they say, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And they ask Him that because that was the popular view. The popular view at the time of Jesus was that you could divorce your wife for any reason you wanted. In fact, really if you had any sense you wouldn't tolerate anything from a woman. You would dump her at the first provocation.

The Rabbis, for example, said this, "Among those who will never behold the face of Gehinnom," that is among those who will never go to hell, "is he who has had a bad wife." And the Rabbis said that's all the hell you'll ever have and God will say you've had enough and send you to Heaven, no matter how bad you are. In fact the Rabbis said this, and I quote, "Such a man is saved from hell because he has expiated his sins on earth by living with her." Well the Rabbis went even further than that. The Rabbis said, "A bad wife is like leprosy to her husband. What is the remedy? Divorce her and be cured of your leprosy." The Rabbis also said, "If a man has a bad wife it is his religious duty to divorce her."

Now, I suppose the question could be asked: What constituted a bad wife? Well, almost anything. If she said an unkind word about her mother-in-law, if she burned the bagels, anything, absolutely anything. So that the common view was that a man could divorce for any cause at all. And they were asking this question of Jesus in a public setting so that Jesus, they knew He wouldn't agree with that and they thought that would set Him against the people who held to the popular view and who had indulged themselves in many divorces. The popular answer to the question was, "Yes, it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason." That was the popular answer but that wasn't Jesus' answer.

Jesus answered, in verse 4, and says, "Have you not read that He, who created them from the beginning, made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. Consequently, they are no longer two but one flesh. And what therefore God has joined together let no man separate.'" When

two people come together in a marriage that is God joining them together and nobody should separate them.

So Jesus takes the very opposite to the popular view. And Jesus reiterates the Genesis standard: one man, one woman coming together creating a relationship for life, a relationship that has the imprimatur of God on it, or the stamp of Divine approval on it, as if God, Himself, had brought them together. Jesus goes right back to Genesis 2:24. He actually quotes from chapter 1 verse 27, I think it is, and He quotes then from Genesis chapter 2 verse 24. So He upholds the original intention: one man, one woman for life.

In the case of Adam and Eve, as I pointed out last time, divorce was not advisable. Divorce was inadvisable. Divorce was wrong. But, more than that, it was impossible since there wasn't anybody else around. Just Adam and Eve, there was no one else for either of them to be interested in or to marry. No option marriage was God's ideal. And that's the way He designed in Eden.

But after the fall, conflict was inevitable and divorce became a reality. But get all the way into the New Testament and the arrival of Jesus and He refers back to the original standard. And God's attitude doesn't change. God never intended for divorce to be the standard or for divorce to even be accepted. It was never God's intention from the beginning. God hates it. One who divorces, according to Malachi 2 verses 13 to 16, "One who divorces," says the prophet, "covers his garment with wrong." It is a sin and he has a sin-splattered garment. You say, "Well, about sin? And what about a bad wife or a bad husband?" Marriage calls for forgiving love. It calls for restoring grace such as we saw illustrated with Hosea and his unfaithful wife.

So Jesus' words then, and I'm just reviewing, confirm the Divine ideal. Well then comes the compelling question, verse 7, so they said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?" And they're referring to Deuteronomy 24. The Pharisees then say, "Okay, well then why did Moses command people to get a divorce?" Well the answer is, of course, that Moses never did command that. Deuteronomy 24 is what they're talking about here; it's what they're referring to. They have twisted that text, Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The Rabbis had twisted it and turned it and conveniently manipulate it into a text that they say commands divorce for any cause at all. Well, in truth that passage does not command divorce. It doesn't condone divorce. It doesn't commend or recommend divorce. It only recognizes divorce and restricts it. It doesn't commend it. It doesn't command it. It doesn't condone it. That was their own convenient twist.

Actually, Deuteronomy 24 prohibits remarriage when divorce occurs, if you really look at it carefully. Because there shouldn't be any divorce. You see in the original Mosaic Law, you say, "Well what about somebody who commits adultery?" Well, in the original Mosaic Law if you committed adultery, what happened to you? You were executed. According to Leviticus chapter 20, verse 10: adultery was a sin to be punished by death. So there was no divorce for adultery, originally because adultery

resulted in capital punishment. So at the beginning in the original Mosaic Law there wasn't any grounds for divorce. And what Deuteronomy 24 is showing is if somebody does get a divorce they really are in a serious condition because if they make another marriage, that marriage constitutes adultery. And we all know how adultery should be dealt with.

So I want to teach you some things tonight because this is a very important subject and a lot of people don't understand it. But I want to teach you some things, some principles. And it's not easy get all this together so you're going to have to follow carefully. Let me say it simply, and you file this in your mind, there were then no grounds for divorce in the Old Testament law. Talking about the Mosaic Law. When God gave His law, which involved many ceremonial features, many moral features, and many civil features having to do with legality, which includes marriage. In all of God's moral and all of His civil law there is no statement in the entire Mosaic Law, in its original giving and its repetition in the book of Deuteronomy, there is no grounds for divorce given in the Old Testament law.

Now that may surprise you but it confirms God's ideal. When God puts His law down and says, "This is My law," it is ideal. Do you understand that? When you look at God's moral law, it's ideal morality. When you look at God's civil law it's His ideal law for society, for Israel. So God's law reflects the Divine ideal and that is why when you go through the Mosaic Law you're not going to find any grounds for divorce. The Old Testament doesn't record anywhere else any authorization of divorce for any specific grounds. It never says in the Old Testament, "Well if this happens you can divorce them." It never says that adultery is a grounds for divorce; it doesn't say that because under the tight application of God's law, adultery was not a grounds for divorce it was a grounds for widowhood. So He said to them, verse 8, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning it has not been this way."

Let me tell you what happened. The law of God doesn't provide any grounds for divorce. But it wasn't long after the law of God was given that it became very apparent to Moses and, of course, to God that the people weren't obeying the law. Oh they had made great their profession. In Exodus 24 they said, "Everything that you've said God, all Your law, we will do it, we will do it. You can throw blood on us and bathe us in the blood signifying our covenant promise. We will do everything Your law commands. We will be obedient; we will do it." Nah, it wasn't long before they didn't do it at all. They were unfaithful to the demands of the law. It wasn't long before they began to break the first commandment and they started having other gods. And then they were just breaking all of those familiar Ten Commandments. They were breaking other commandments violating ceremonial law, civil law, and, significantly, moral law. They were disobedient.

It also became apparent that they would not carry out the execution that God had attached to at least 35 transgressions of the law. There are some elements of the Old Testament law that God says require a death penalty. And this is to preserve righteousness and protect society from chaos and

self-destruction. And it wasn't very long until the people were disobedient at such a wide level; the leaders were equally disobedient at such a wide level, that nobody enforced the penalties.

I mean just take for one illustration. When God sent Israel into the land after the exodus from Egypt and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, they finally went into the land of Canaan. They were now in the land of Canaan. Here was the people of God inside the promised land. And all in that land, all over that land, were Canaanites who idolatrous, who were pagans, who did not worship the true and living God. Whose lifestyles were filled with fornication and adultery and all kinds of imaginable and unimaginable sin including child murder, including the burying live babies in a jar in the walls of new buildings as some kind of an appeasement to the deities. They were a gross and wicked set tribal religions that occupied Canaan. And God said when you go in, you need to act as My executioner and you need to destroy the Canaanites.

They didn't do that; they didn't do it. They did not obey God in executing the Canaanites. They did not obey God in executing people who broke the moral law, which called for the death penalty. They were in a constant state of disobedience. Even their rulers, you look later when the kings came and Saul and David and Solomon and their lives are, of course, filled with iniquity. And even, I guess in some ways, the best of them, David and Solomon, with their unfaithfulness, with their many wives and women, and Solomon's beyond the ability to count. And they lived and flourished. And Solomon, of course, became wealthy and prosperous in an earthly fashion.

And God was amazingly gracious. God, Himself, could have wiped out the Canaanites. God, Himself, could have divinely executed people who broke those capital offenses that were included in His law. And occasionally He did that. That's right; occasionally God, in a divine act, executed somebody who had violated His law. It happened. You can study the Old Testament and you see at certain points God executing somebody. The ground opens and swallows somebody. Or a bear comes out of the woods and tears up some boys who were blaspheming God by blaspheming His prophet. There are times when God rained down judgment on nations. There are times when God, Himself, acted as executioner. But, frankly, Israel, who was supposed to be His executioner and uphold the integrity of His law in the world by carrying out His desire, didn't do it.

But God is merciful. And God is gracious. And so God didn't kill everybody who deserved to be killed. And aren't you glad? God was merciful. Verse 8 again, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives." But that was never how it was supposed to be. It was concession to mercy. It was a concession to grace. It was God being compassionate. You see adulterers were not executed. And so we can assume that God allowed divorce in some cases, though it is not specifically stated in the Old Testament.

I believe that the Jews in the Old Testament had received perhaps some word from the Lord, maybe through a prophet that's not included in Scripture, or maybe with direct revelation, that divorce would

be tolerated for the hardness of heart. Because when it says here that Moses because of the hardness of your heart permitted to divorce, I think Moses is reflecting something that God is tolerating. I mean Jesus is saying it was allowed within the framework of the Law of Moses. God then must have allowed it.

There are things, by the way, that the people knew that aren't recorded in Scripture. God revealed them but they weren't in the record. For example, probably the classic illustration is the fact the Cain and Abel brought sacrifices. Remember? And Cain brought a sacrifice of the fruit of the ground. And Abel brought a sacrifice of an animal. And God accepted Abel's sacrifice and rejected Cain's. There isn't anything in Genesis that tells us that God told them what to bring. But we can assume God told them what to bring because Abel knew to bring what was right and God honored it. So there are those elements in the Old Testament where God revealed something not recorded in Scripture. And I think that is true of the proper sacrifice, which Abel obeyed and Cain did not. And therefore God rejected Cain's sacrifice; and Cain, in anger, killed his faithful brother.

I think we can assume that somewhere along the line God revealed that if He was going to be merciful and not kill all the adulterers, He would allow for divorce in the case of adultery. Now you say, "Why would you think that? Why would you think that God would allow for divorce in the case of adultery?" Well, because I think that God tolerates divorce in a framework of disobedience. And there are two ways I want to illustrate that to you.

Turn, for a moment, to the tenth chapter of Ezra ... tenth chapter of Ezra. Now again, you know when you go into the Old Testament, like I did this morning, you can not just jump in there, grab a phrase, and jump back out. You have to understand what's going on here in the context. Chapter 10 of Ezra, which is three books in front Psalm, for you that are wondering. Ezra 10:1, "Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women, and children, gathered to him from Israel for the people wept bitterly." This is an interesting scene here. Everybody's weeping. Everybody's crying. "And Shecaniah, the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, 'We have been unfaithful to our God. And have married foreign women from the people's of the land.'" They had married Gentile women, idolatress women, pagans. "Yet now, there is hope for Israel in spite of this." Now the future of Israel was on the line here, folks. We have done a horrible thing. We've been unfaithful to our God. We have married foreign women. What does that do? That pollutes the nation. That pollutes the national identity. That strikes a serious blow at the future of this ethnic group. And much is at stake because this is the line from which Messiah comes.

So, verse 3, he says, Shecaniah, "'So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children according to the counsel of my Lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God and let it be done according to the law. Arise for this matter is your responsibility but we will be with you. Be courageous and act.'" Then Ezra rose and made the leading

priest, the Levites, and all Israel take oath that they would do according to this proposal. So they took the oath."

Now this is an amazing thing, very amazing. Now let me kind of break it down for you. Verse 1, Ezra is praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself. And he's apparently doing it very loudly because he's in front of the house of God and there's a large assembly, as there always would be at the house of God, the temple. And of course, especially now in this rebuilt temple which was such a blessing to the people after having come back from captivity in Babylon and rebuilt the temple under Zerubbabel to replace the one that had been built by Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians. So it was great to be gathered there. And all these people were there men, women, and children. They were all gathered there. And Ezra starts weeping out loud in order to inspire people to do the same.

Now let me just tell you a little more about the time. The time of Ezra is after the remnant of Jews have returned from Babylon. Remember? 586BC they go into captivity. It's after a 70-year period of captivity. The first deportation 603, then 597, then 586. After 70 years have gone by from around the first deportation, they returned. Many of the Jews, of course, who went into captivity, are dead. Many are absorbed into Babylonian life and they just disappear into the amalgam of the nations. But about 50 thousand came back. Israel no longer numbers in the millions as they did when they came in the Exodus out of Egypt. They're down to a small group of people, 50 thousand of them. I think there are probably about 14 million in the world today. 50 thousand. So that all of Messianic hope hinges on the conduct of these 50 thousand; now out of that 50 thousand there are men, women, and children. You break that down and you have a few thousand couples, maybe you have 10 thousand, maybe you have 15 thousand couples. The number is small or even smaller.

From 603 to 586 the nation of Israel, what was left of it in the southern kingdom Judah, had been taken captive. Jerusalem was destroyed. The theocracy was destroyed. The temple of Solomon was crushed. They were no longer a nation. The northern kingdom of Israel was gone. The southern kingdom of Judah, the northern kingdom that went into Assyria in 722 and they were gone for good. The southern kingdom is now in Babylon and the land is back in the hands of Gentiles. There is not theocracy. Gentiles fill the land.

It was about 538BC when the first return came. Small remnant, as I said, about 50 thousand set out to go back to the land. And to rebuild their nation and rebuild their spiritual identity and rebuilt the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel. And the temple was begun in 520 and they built it in about four years. So that by 516 the temple's back in service but it is a meager place compared to what it once was. The temple of Zerubbabel was a very, very frail, small, and homely effort to replicate the great Solomonic temple.

When they returned they wanted to rebuild their city, Jerusalem. They wanted to rebuild the wall. You remember Nehemiah helped them do that. They wanted to rebuild the temple and get their worship back in place. They also wanted to reinstate the law of God, okay? So they want a city and a nation and a temple and they want to get the law of God back in place. And that really fell largely to Ezra. Ezra didn't come back in the first return in 538. He really came back at almost 80 years later. He came back in 458. He came back in a second return. And his task was to elevate the law of God. This is very important. Back in chapter 7, verse 10, "Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." That's the key verse to understanding Ezra.

Now Ezra was a decedent of Aaron. He was a decedent of Aaron. The beginning of chapter 7, "Ezra, son of Seraiah, son of Azariah," it goes all the way down, and verse 5, "Son of Aaron, the chief priest." So he had priestly blood; he was in the priestly line; he was a priestly decedent. He was a strong man. He was a Godly man. There are some incredible things that are said about Ezra. He was a scribe. And it said of Ezra that he could copy the entire Old Testament from memory. Amazing knowledge of God's law; he knew God's law. And it was his desire to set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to live it and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel. So you have Zerubbabel rebuilding the temple. You have Nehemiah rebuilding the wall. And you have Ezra rebuilding the place of the law of God. He wanted to elevate the law of God and generate the obedience of the people.

And he knew there had to be national repentance. And there had to be a commitment to obedience. And one of the terrible things they had done, back to chapter 10. One of the terrible things they had done, since they came back. In the less than 100 years that they had been back, one of the terrible things they had done was intermarry with idolaters. They'd gone right back to an old pattern that devastated that nation. A pattern that caused the northern kingdom Israel to go out of existence and the southern kingdom Judah to go into captivity, and so he wants to make things right. And so he's gathering the people and he starts praying and confessing sin and weeping and prostrating himself and everybody joins in. And then Shecaniah stands up and calls people to divorce their pagan wives and get rid of the children of those wives.

Now Ezra knew God's law. Shecaniah is acting as a representative of Ezra here. And they knew God's law. And they also that God hated divorce. In fact, it was the prophet Malachi who lived at this era of Israel's life who said that God has said, "I hate divorce." They knew how God felt about divorce. Divorce was not what God desired. It was what God hated. But the small remnant was very fragile. And some of them had done the absolutely unthinkable: they had married non-Jews and thus threatened the future existence of Israel. The Messianic line, the Messianic Kingdom, divine purposes for Israel were in jeopardy if the nation was destroyed by intermarriage. And how could there ever be at the time of the tribulation, at the end of the age, 12 thousand from every tribe brought together by God to evangelize the world if there weren't any tribes and weren't any Jews?

Now Ezra had been given authority to act in behalf of God's law. Go back to chapter 7 for a moment. This is a fascinating moment in Israel's history. And Ezra needed some authority to act. As he went back he was given a decree, which King Artaxerxes prepared for him. King Artaxerxes is the king of Babylon. And so he gives him this document, he gives it to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the Lord and statutes to Israel. This is what it said, "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of God of Heaven, perfect peace." Starts out with a greeting, perfect peace. "And now I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem may go with you." So Artaxerxes is going to let another group be exported, as it were, back to Israel. He gives permission for this to happen. "And you're going to be their leader and I'm going to give you permission."

Go down to verse 23, "Whatever is commanded by the God of Heaven let it be done," this is part of the document. "Whatever is commanded by the God of Heaven let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of Heaven lest their be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons." You know what Artaxerxes says? "Ezra, you go back. And I'm giving you full authority to implement the law of God. Whatever the law of God says, you do it. You go back and if the law of God says it, you do it because I don't want the God of Heaven bringing His wrath on me and my sons. So you go and you're free to implement the law of God."

In verse 24 he says, "You can impose tax, tribute, toll on priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers," you can do anything you want. Verse 25, "According to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, you can appoint magistrates and judges to deal with civil issues. You can judge the people in the province beyond the river. Even all those who know the laws of your God and they teach anyone who is ignorant of them." You have freedom to proselyte; you have freedom to preach, to explain to people the reality of your God. And verse 26, here's a key, "Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon on him strictly, whether for death or for banishment, or for confiscation of goods, or for imprisonment." He gives Ezra this power to execute people ... to execute people.

Then he says, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart." This is amazing, Ezra says. "To adorn the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem and extended loving kindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. "Thus," he says, "I was strengthened according to the hand of the Lord my God upon me and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me." He goes and he has full authority even to the point where he can execute people who disobey the law of God. So Ezra and his appointed leaders and magistrates were fully responsible to bring the nation under God's law. Even exacting the death penalty.

And one issue comes to the floor immediately. Now you can go over to chapter 10. They take a look and realize they've got a serious problem. The people have violated the law of God a lot of ways in the 80 years they've been back. They have violated the law of God in many ways. One of the worst is they've married pagan idolaters. And so, Shecaniah, who is obviously one of the leaders, one of the ones that had been appointed by Ezra, stands up and says, "We've been unfaithful to our God and married foreign women."

Now, I hasten to say he didn't do that. Shecaniah did not do that. You say, "How do you know that?" Because the ones who did are listed in the chapter, look at the end of the chapter starting at verse 18. All their names are there. Isn't that interesting? Just in case you wanted the scuttlebutt, here they are. Among the sons of the priests who had married foreign wives, there was Jeshua, and it goes on to name them all the way down to the end of the chapter. All these had married foreign wives and some of them had wives by whom they had children. This is tragic. And these are the leaders.

But Shecaniah's name isn't there; that's how I know he wasn't involved. His name doesn't appear in the list. And I have to tell you his father's name does 'cause his father's name is right there, isn't it, in verse 2, Jehiel. And five of his paternal uncles also are listed in verse 26. So it had affected his family. But he takes his place and he says, "If we will look for hope for Israel in spite of this, we have to make a covenant with our God," verse 3, "to divorce these women."

Now let me tell something. Again, they understood that God hated divorce. But it has to be. It has to be because if it isn't there's not going to be any hope for Israel. So in verse 10 Ezra stands up and says okay he's got everybody together, a great assembly. They're all assembled, in verse 9, the men and Judah and Benjamin. They're all assembled at Jerusalem and three days and twentieth day of ninth month. And they all sit in the open square before the house of God trembling because of this matter and heavy rain. And he stands up, Ezra, and says, "You've been unfaithful and married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. Now therefore make confession to the Lord God of your fathers and do His will and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

You know what that tells me? God hates divorce but sometimes in some very, very special circumstances it is the lesser of the evils. Okay? We can see that concession made here. The very thing that God hated is the thing that God had to allow. It's the thing He had to call for. Now they never should have married those women in the first place because that was forbidden. Back in Deuteronomy chapter 7 ... in Deuteronomy chapter 7, "When the Lord, your God, shall bring into the land," this was the law was being repeated to them, "and you're coming into the land to possess and you shall clear away the nations, the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, the Hivites, Jebusites. When the Lord, your God, shall deliver them before you, you shall defeat them then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them. Show no favor to them. Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them. You shall not give your daughters to their sons nor shall you take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following Me to

serve other Gods." Which is exactly what they did. "Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you." Which is exactly what happened. "And He will quickly destroy you." Which is exactly what He did. "So go in there and tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and hew down their Asherahs," their special worship grounds, "and burn their graven images with fire. And destroy those people for you are a holy people of the Lord your God." The direct commandment of God: don't marry them, destroy them; kill them.

Now here we are, many years later, they didn't destroy them. In fact, Israel winds up getting thrown out of the land for good, Judah taken out of the land for 70 years plus. They finally come back and tribal descendents of those original Canaanites are still occupying the land and they still don't obey the commandment of God even after the captivity. And they go back and they start to intermarry with these people. Now God could have said to them: kill them; go home and kill those pagans. And that would have consistent with the original command, Deuteronomy 7, right? Go ahead and execute them. And you know what? Ezra could have done it because Artaxerxes gave him the right to do it, didn't he?

But God is merciful. And says through the leadership of Ezra, "Divorce them. Put them away from you. Protect the purity of the race and protect the purity of the religion." The endangered race can be rescued. As Shecaniah says there at the end of verse 2, "There's hope for Israel. In spite of this, there is hope. But the only hope is you've got to get rid of those wives. You can't pollute the race. And you can't pollute the religion by being married to the idolaters." The endangered race can be rescued. And God, as I said, would have every right to kill them and then there wouldn't even be a divorce. But God shows mercy to those Gentiles by calling for their divorce rather than their death.

To keep the religion pure, to keep the race pure was the only aim of Ezra. That was what he set his heart to do. It was the aim of Godly exiles and Godly leaders. And as a small minority trying to reclaim their lives, a small group of repatriated Jews living in the midst of a large population of influential pagans, they needed some drastic steps to protect their future and their hope. And drastic measures, in this case, called for divorce. Oh, it could have been much more drastic. God could have called for their execution. But God was merciful to them and merciful to the Jews who married them who had, no doubt, developed affection for them. Divorce was mercy. Death would have been explicit justice. And so there is the lesser of evils: God hates divorce, but worse than that, He hates the destruction of His people and their religion.

By the way, there is an illustration--I won't go to it, I don't have time--Numbers 25 where God did call for executions ... Numbers 25, the first nine or ten verses. So listen to this, now folks, Ezra is not establishing a normal Christian standard. And this is what I want to say to you; here's where I've been going: you can't say, "Well I have an unsaved wife, I'm dumping her based on Ezra 10." You knew where I was going with that already. You can't do that. "So why can't I do that?" Because 1 Corinthians 7 gives an explicit New Testament teaching and I mean it couldn't be more explicit than it

is.

In the New Testament the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, 1 Corinthians 7 verse 10. "But to the married I give instructions, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband," don't get a divorce. "And if you do leave then you have to remain unmarried or else be reconciled." You can't just divorce and then go get married. If you choose to do that, to leave your husband, you have to stay single or be reconciled. "But to the rest," verse 12, "I say this," and I'm not quoting Jesus here but this is Divine inspiration, "if any brother has a wife who's an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away." The explicit teaching of the New Testament is if you're married to unbeliever who wants to remain with you, then stay married.

The account of Ezra 10 doesn't apply. That is not a normal Christian standard. That was a people, the people of God Israel, who had violated a covenant, which was given to them that had to do with how they conducted themselves with the people of the land who were in Canaan at the time. And at stake was the preservation of God's people and the religion of Israel. So Ezra was not establishing a normal Christian standard. He was dealing with a special Jewish moment in redemptive history. It was the lesser of evils to preserve the race and the religion and allow the divorce. This is not the standard and norm.

And in the New Testament, if you have an unbelieving husband or an unbelieving wife and that person is pleased to stay with you then, the apostle Paul says, let them stay and don't divorce them. And he tells us why. Back to 1 Corinthians 7, "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife." In other words, as God pours blessing down on a believing wife it'll spill off on the unbelieving husband. "And the unbelieving wife," reversing it, "is sanctified through her believing husband." And it even goes on to say it'll have an affect on your children that is positive. The best thing that ever happened in a mixed marriage is that the blessing of God on the believer is going to spill over on the unbeliever.

I mean if you're an unbelieving wife, let me tell you, you're blessed to be married to a Christian husband because as God blesses him, you'll get the residue. And if you're an unbelieving husband, the best thing that you have in this world is a believing wife because as God blesses her, it'll spill on you and on the children. "But then," in verse 15, "if the unbelieving one leaves, let them leave. You're not in bondage in such cases. God has called us to peace. When an unbeliever says, "I want out, I want nothing to do with you, I want nothing to do with this marriage, I want nothing to do with your God, I want nothing to do with your religion, your Christianity," let them go, you're not in bondage. The bond is broken and you're free from that relationship. And don't think that you're going to be able to save your husband or save your wife in every situation. If they don't want to be there, let them go.

One other thought sort of wraps this up from Ezra. One of the characteristics of pagan worship was adultery. Temple prostitutes, both male and female, engaging in sex orgies. And we can assume, and I think it's a fair assumption, that these pagans with whom the Jews married were a part of their pagan religions. And, no doubt, largely indulged in adulterous behavior. So we could assume that there would be here those kinds of adulteries because of the pagan idolatry. And that would be grounds, certainly defined as such in the New Testament, for divorce. We don't know that for certain but we could assume it to be true.

But what we do learn from the Ezra passage is not that there's some kind of universal standard. In fact, this is the only time in the entire Old Testament that God tells somebody to get a divorce. And it has nothing to do with a permanent standard; it has nothing to do for anybody outside of Israel for the preservation of the race and for obedience to the law of God. And it was also an act of penitence because in marrying, they had directly violated the law of God. So again, what Ezra does is not establish a norm but a unique illustration of God allowing divorce in a special case.

Now, there's just one other thought I need to give you. And I think it's probably better for me to leave it till next time because I want to tie it into something else that is really, really profound. And that is the reaction of the disciples. Let's go back quickly to Matthew 19 and I'll just end it there.

I don't know if you enjoyed getting into these Old Testament passages as much as I do and having it open up. That's why it's kind of hard to get past it because there's so much there. But I want you to notice what happens. So Jesus says, in verse 8, and we're just reflecting back now to the original text, "Moses did permit you to divorce your wives." So we know that it was permitted because that's what Jesus said. It was permitted by Moses, I think, acting in behalf of God; it was permitted because God was obviously not killing people who committed adultery. God allowed for divorce, why? Because if there was a person who was Godly person married to an adulterer or an adulteress they were in an impossible relationship for a number of reasons. They were being violated in terms of their affections. But more than that, masses of populations in ancient times died because of venereal disease. And there was no reason to preserve a marriage with an adulterous individual who would potentiate the very death of a faithful spouse. And if there wasn't going to be execution of the adulterers, then divorce was a concession God made mercifully. God then, not killing that adulterous person and Israel not carrying out that law, isn't going to keep that innocent, Godly, and faithful person in bondage to that relationship. But rather allow for a divorce to free that person from the potential of disease, as well as the loss of affection and the disruption of life.

So it was because of hardness of heart that it was permitted but it was never God's intention. And it was regulated, in verse 9 and this I believe was revealed in the Old Testament at some point, not recorded. And I say to you, "Whoever divorces his wife except for immorality and marries another woman, commits adultery." If you ever divorce it can only be for immorality. That is the standard. And I really believe that Jesus here is not saying something new. I believe He is referring to a common

understanding that God had disclosed to His people in the past, not written in specifics in the Old Testament. But it is illustrated in the Old Testament and I'm going to show you the most graphic way it is illustrated, if not explicitly stated. And I'll do that next time.

But Jesus affirms here, as He did in the sermon on the Mount, every time He referred to the law of God He goes back to the original: Yes, it is allowed. It never was God's intent. God allows because of your unceasing sin because you never did uphold the capital punishment that he required because you never did destroy the Canaanites. You potentiated all of this, and God in His compassion because of the hardness of your heart, frees up the innocent person from having to be bound to an adulterous partner by allowing for divorce so that the innocent person is delivered. If the guilty one is not executed you can't sentence the innocent one to a life of horror in that kind of relationship.

So listen carefully, divorce was never an Old Testament provision for the sinning partner. It was an Old Testament provision for the protection of the innocent partner, right? That's how you understand that. Hard-hearted people were devastating marriages and Godly, faithful people needed to have a way out. But the only way out, according to verse 9, is not if she burns the bagels, not if she criticizes her mother-in-law, but if there is adultery. Not if he doesn't bring home as much money as you like, and not if he doesn't show you the affection you wish he would, but if he commits adultery. And if you divorce for any other reason and get married again that is committing adultery. And that is being spoken to the innocent partner. If you divorce your spouse for any other reason than that spouse's unrepentant adultery and go marry someone else, you commit adultery in doing that. So that you're guilty of the very sin that God hates.

Well, we can conclude then that the only grounds for divorce in the Old Testament/New Testament is adultery. And I'm going to show you how that works in the Old Testament. I'm going to show you a graphic illustration next time. But let me give you verse 10 and I'll stop. The disciples, I love their response, "Whoa, if the relationship with the man with his wife is like this it's better not to marry." You know what they're saying? "Seems to me that if you get married, you're stuck." They got the message. If you can't get out of this deal, except for immorality; if you can't get out of it when she burns the bagels; if you can't get out of it when she doesn't treat you right; if you can't get out of it when she doesn't fulfill all of your dreams and desires and hopes and so forth; if you can't get out of this, better never to get into this.

Now there's some people in our church who are living by this rule. This is true. So you know they got the message; they understood marriage is so binding, you get in this deal there is no way out of this except by adultery, so it's better not to marry. Is that the right conclusion? Come back next time.

Let's pray. Father, thanks for a great day, great evening of study in Your Word. And we pray that our hearts and minds will continue to grasp the greatness and consistency of Biblical truth. And we thank You for it in Our Savior's name, Amen.

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