

Why Did Ezra Require Divorce If God Condemns Divorce?

Scripture consistently presents faithless, unjust divorce as something God condemns:

“For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.” - **Malachi 2:16 (ESV)**

Yet Ezra 9–10 records Israel being commanded to separate from their foreign wives. Why would this be required if Scripture condemns faithless divorce?

‘After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ²For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost...

¹⁰ “And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, ¹¹ which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. ¹² Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’ ¹³ And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, ¹⁴ shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? ¹⁵ O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this.”

While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. ² And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from

the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. ³Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these 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. ⁴Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.” ⁵Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath.

... ⁷And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, ⁸and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles.

⁹Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. ¹⁰And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. ¹¹Now then make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives... All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even borne children.” – **Ezra chapters 9-10** (selected verses)

Note: Although Ezra does not record God directly saying, ‘Divorce these women,’ Ezra clearly treats the marriages as violations of God’s covenant requirements, and he supports the proposal to separate from the foreign wives.

What was the problem?

Ezra was reestablishing the temple worship practices after the Babylonian exile. It was critical for the nation of Israel as part of their covenant with God to remain faithful to God and not serve other foreign Gods. At stake was not only the spiritual well-being of the people but also the practices of worship in the reestablished post-exile Israel. This also concerned the preservation of the covenant community through which God’s promises would ultimately be fulfilled.

God had Already Forbidden Marriage with Foreign Idolaters

The prohibition was not a blanket prohibition against every marriage involving a non-Israelite. The concern in Deuteronomy 7 and Exodus 34 is particularly the religious/covenantal danger of being led into idolatry. The issue was not simply ethnicity. The marriages involved peoples associated with the idolatrous practices from which God

had commanded Israel to remain separate. There are examples of foreigners who married that the bible speaks favorably of such as Ruth, or Rahab.

But God's command concerning spouses who served foreign Gods:

"You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn your sons from following me, to serving other gods, then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly." - **Deuteronomy 7:3–4 (ESV)**

"lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods." - **Exodus 34:15–16 (ESV)**

It isn't OK to Persist in Sin

Their marriages were covenant violations before God – because God had told them explicitly not to marry foreigners who served foreign Gods. These marriages had been entered into in violation of the covenant requirements that Ezra believed applied to Israel. Therefore, the fact that marriages already existed did not make the original disobedience acceptable.

It wasn't OK for them to say "well we married anyway, can't do anything about it now. Oh well."

Committing a sin doesn't make the sin permissible simply because reversing it creates difficult consequences.

The fact that a sinful situation has become established does not automatically mean that continuing the situation is morally required. Sometimes repentance involves difficult consequences precisely because the original sin has created a complicated situation.

But What About Solomon?

Some might say, "hey, Solomon had 1,000 wives (700 wives, 300 concubines) many of them were foreign wives who served foreign Gods and Solomon built places of worship to the foreign gods of his wives." That is correct:

"For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the

Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.” - **1 Kings 11:5–8 (ESV)**

“It was foreign women that made King Solomon sin. Here was a man who was greater than any of the kings of other nations. God loved him and made him king over all of Israel, and yet he fell into this sin.” – **Nehemiah 13:26 (GNT)**

Solomon’s sin isn’t permission to continue sinning. In fact, it helps explain the concern of Ezra at that critical time in Israel’s history.

What Principles Should We take from the Incident, and what should we avoid?

Principles to take from the Ezra Incident

1. It isn’t OK to Persist in Sin, even if Things Will Be Messy if You Stop

It would have been easy to rationalize “well, maybe they shouldn’t have gotten married, but they are married now, and to fix things will mean a messy situation for the women and kids.”

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” – **Romans 6:1-2 (ESV)**

Romans 6 establishes the broader Christian principle that God’s grace doesn’t give us permission to continue in known sin.

“Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” – **Proverbs 28:13 (ESV)**

Note: repentance may require costly steps, and difficulty alone is not a reason to continue in sin; but whether a situation must be undone depends on what God’s Word says about that situation, and for marriage the New Testament generally says to remain (**1 Cor 7:10–13, 17–24**) – we will address this more in a moment.

2. The Rules Apply to the Rich and Powerful Also

Ezra specifically says that the officials and chief men were **foremost in this faithlessness**. They did not receive an exemption because of their position. They didn’t get a pass because of their power. God is not a respecter of persons.

Lesson Not to Take from the Ezra Incident

3. That it is OK for Christians Today to Leave Their Spouse Today if They are an Unbeliever

We must apply God's commands in their proper covenantal and historical context.

The setting really matters here. Ezra and the Jews were under the commands of the Mosaic covenant. Ezra's situation wasn't simply "believer married to unbeliever." It was post-exilic Israel violating specific covenant restrictions concerning the surrounding peoples.

Because Ezra is dealing with Israel's covenant obligations under the Mosaic law, whereas Paul is addressing Christians living under the New Covenant and specifically addresses existing mixed marriages – their circumstances are different.

Today as Christians we are a global faith, no longer under the Mosaic covenant. While Scripture warns believers against entering binding relationships that place them in spiritual partnership with unbelievers (**2 Corinthians 6:14**), Paul specifically tells a Christian who is already married to an unbeliever not to initiate divorce merely because the spouse is an unbeliever.

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. – **1 Corinthians 7:12-15 (ESV)**

Paul's situation was not about covenant obedience, but about a Christian spouse who is married to an unbelieving one outside of the mosaic covenant in Corinth.

Note: if you are married to an unbeliever, or your marriage had a complicated beginning, the Ezra passage is not telling you to leave. That is a specific situation for those who were under the Mosaic covenant.

But What Happened to the Wives and Kids?

The Bible does not say so it wouldn't appropriate to make up an outcome. We do know that someone is not absolved of his responsibilities just because he made a mistake. Beyond that we can only speculate what happened.

Quick Summary

Ezra does not teach that divorce is generally good, nor does it teach that a Christian should divorce an unbelieving spouse. Ezra records a unique covenantal crisis in post-exilic Israel in which the people had violated specific Mosaic covenant requirements concerning marriage to the surrounding peoples. Their existing marriages did not make their original disobedience acceptable.

The broader principle remains applicable: we cannot use the difficulty of correcting a sinful situation as a reason to continue in sin. But we must also apply biblical commands in their proper covenantal and historical context. Context matters for interpreting passages. For Christians today, 1 Corinthians 7 explicitly says that a believer should not divorce an unbelieving spouse who is willing to remain married.