

SEPARATE FOR GOD

by Rod Miller

KEY VERSE:

Ezra 7:10. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the status and ordinance in Israel.

FAITH STORY:

Ezra 7:1-10:17—Session Goal: To help the students consider what it means to be separate and holy for God.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students should:

- Students will hear the story of Ezra and his actions.
- Students will compare Ezra's actions with other teachings and people in the Bible.
- Students will discuss whether Ezra was faithful to God's desires.
- Students will consider their lives and where they can apply the "separate and holy for God" principle.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Assign parts and responsibilities for the trial.
- 2 Give out scripture passage as needed.
- 3 Arrange classroom as a courtroom
- 4 Become familiar with basic court proceedings.

This lesson will need advance work on your part. The students will need to be assigned their parts and given the scriptures beforehand, so they can study them and be prepared to answer questions as their character would. There are three ways to accomplish this. One option is to assign the parts the session before and have them come to class prepared. Another possibility is to take two sessions, using the first to prepare and the second to do the trial. A third way is to find a time that the students would have enough time to both prepare and perform the session all at one setting. The size, setting, and students of your class will help you determine what is best for your group.

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5 minutes)

Ask students to stand up and move to either side of the room based on their response to the following questions. If you were part of a religious group that restricted your interaction with the world, would you stay with it for the rest of your life or split as soon as you could? If staying, go to the right side of the room. If splitting, go to the left side. Second question: Do you think God might ever call you personally to be set apart from the world in order to follow God? If yes, go to the right side. If that doesn't seem possible, move to the left.

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

If your class is familiar with the Amish lead them in a brief discussion of how they separate themselves from the world as part of their faith tradition. Ask students if they can think of other groups that separate themselves from society for religious purposes.

Transition statement: *Let's look at a story in the Bible about a man named Ezra who had some very strong convictions about what it means to be holy and separate for God.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (30 minutes)

Students will learn about this story through a mock trial of Ezra. **The question:** *Is Ezra's sending away the foreign wives true to God's desire for God's people?*

You will need a judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, jury and witnesses. Follow the proceedings as noted at the end of this lesson.

At the completion of the trial, lead a discussion of the story: *What other ways could Ezra have acted to keep the Israelites pure? Is there a different question he should ask instead of are they the right race? (Such as: Are they faithful to God?)*

APPLY: (10 minutes)

Say: *Jesus brought a new way of being holy to us—holiness that depends not on physical bloodlines but on a "spiritual heart line." Jesus said salvation and a relationship with God is for everyone—everyone who believes and confesses Jesus as Lord. Following Jesus and doing what he asks us to do is what sets us apart from the world.*

Instruct students to take some time alone—go outside or another part of the church if possible. During this time alone, ask students to imagine they are "judge and jury" of their life right now. The question: Is there enough evidence to prove that you are following Jesus? If you were on trial, what would the verdict be? What next steps would you like to take today with God? How can you become "separate and holy for God"?

RESPOND: (5 minutes)

Close with a prayer when the students return to the classroom and promise them that you will pray for them in the coming week.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

How to remain holy for God is a question we all must ask of ourselves. Ezra answered that question by demanding strict adherence to the law, which he interpreted to mean separation from the evil found around him. Ezra declared that anyone who was not a physical descendent of Abraham was evil and must be cut off.

Before we dismiss Ezra as irrational, let's consider his situation. Before the exile the people were counting on the temple and God's covenant with Abraham and David to keep them safe. Ezra, as a scribe and priest, knew the law, and when he returned from exile he was appalled that the people were breaking the law just as they did before God's punishment of the exile. He realized that God's continued blessings were not unconditional, but were rewards for faithfulness. Ezra recognized God's right to punish them for the sins they were committing, and his answer was to demand total separation from the possibility of being

drawn away from God. Therefore, Ezra demanded the expulsion of the foreign wives (Ezra 10: 3-6). Ezra felt that outward purity would lead to purity of the heart.

While we may frown on Ezra's actions, the Jews following him applauded it. He became known as the Second Moses or lawgiver to the rabbis and the Pharisees of Jesus' time. Saul, as a devout Pharisee, agreed with this thinking and we see it acted out in his persecution of the early church.

WORKS CITED:

Barker, Kenneth, ed. **The NIV Study Bible**. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985.

Buttrick, George Arthur, ed. **The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Vol 2**. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.

Bontrager, Marion G. **Introduction to Biblical Literature**, Hesston, KS: 1996.

SEPARATE FOR GOD • Worksheet

THE TRIAL OF EZRA

The question: *Is Ezra's sending away the foreign wives true to God's desire for God's people?*

Courtroom procedures:

- The judge reads the charge.
- Both Prosecutor and Defense make opening statements.
- The Prosecutor calls its witnesses one at a time. After the prosecution questions them, the Defense can also question them if they wish to do so.
- The Defense then calls its witnesses and questions them, with the Prosecution then cross-examining them.
- Both the Prosecution and Defense make summary statements to the jury.
- The Jury discusses it amongst themselves and decides the defendant's guilt or innocence.

Judge: The judge will need to read the charge and keep order during the trial.

Jury: The jury will be made up of those who do not have other parts. If you do not have enough students in your class, the witnesses can serve on the jury.

Prosecutor and Defense Attorneys will need to decide what questions to ask each witness so the story they tell supports the case they are representing.

Witnesses: The witnesses will tell the story of their character to the class with questions from the attorneys. If you do not have enough students some can serve as more than one character or leave out some of the less important witnesses. You may also eliminate some of the witnesses if you need to save time.

Prosecution witnesses:

Moses: Exodus 2:11-23, 12:38, Numbers 12:1-15

When Moses flees from Egypt he marries a daughter of a priest of Midian and they have a son. Moses leads a mixed crowd of slaves, both descendents of Jacob and other nations, out of Egypt (12:38); and all of them make a covenant with God at Mount Sinai. Later Miriam and Aaron, Moses' sister and brother, speak against Moses because of his Cushite wife, and Miriam is stuck with leprosy.

Joshua: Joshua 8:30-35, 23:1-24:27

These are two stories of Joshua renewing the Sinai covenant. Notice at the first there are aliens present (8:30-35). These include the people who have joined them in the wilderness as well as possibly the Gibeonites of chapter 9 (NIV Study Bible, 302) Scholars suggest that there are at least three groups at Shechem: Israelites who have returned from Egypt before the Exodus, the marginalized poor of the area, and the generations who have experienced the

wilderness and exodus. The renewal of covenant at Shechem is the new covenant for these people with God

Ruth: All of the book Ruth, but specifically 1:1-22, 4:13-22, and Matthew 1:5.

Ruth is a Moabite woman. She marries an Israelite who is living in her country because of a famine. When he dies she returns to Israel with her mother-in-law. There she becomes the wife of Boaz, as he is next of kin and is an ancestor of both David and Jesus.

Elijah: I Kings 17:1-24, Luke 4:25-26.

After Elijah predicts a drought in Israel God feeds him at a stream until it dries up. God then sends him to a widow in Zarephath, in the territory of Sidon, and through his provision feeds the widow, her son, and Elijah. Jesus uses this example when he speaks at Nazareth as an example of God being available to all.

Rahab: Joshua 2:1-24, 6:22-25, Matthew 1:5.

Rahab hid the spies Joshua had sent to spy on Jericho. Because she protected them she was saved from the destruction of Jericho. She is listed as an ancestor of David and Jesus.

Paul: Acts 7:54-8:3, 9:1-31, 13:1-15:35 Philippians 3:5-6, Colossians 3:11, Ephesians 2:11-14, Galatians 3:28.

In Saul the Pharisee we see the same zeal of "Torah". The man was out to protect the law by force became the very one who insisted the good news of Christ was for all and demanded there no longer be Jew or Gentile in the church, but all were one in Christ.

Defense witnesses:

Solomon: I Kings 3:1-11:13.

Solomon marries a daughter of Pharaoh (3:1) and then builds her a house (7:8). Because he turns away from God in his old age (11:6) God rejects him and tears most of the kingdom from him (11:11). The reason given for his turning to other gods is he loves his foreign wives (11:1-4). Compare 11:1-13 with 3:1-15 where

Solomon asks for wisdom and chapter 8 when he dedicates the Temple.

Ahab: I Kings: 16:29-33, 21:1-29

Ahab marries Jezebel the daughter of the King of Sidon. She leads him into sin (21:25-26), which causes God to pronounce judgment on him.

Othniel: Judges 3:5-8

Othniel is the first of the judges listed in the book of Judges. Because the Israelites intermarried the inhabitants of Canaan and worshiped other gods, God would become angry with them and punish them. When the oppression became severe the Israelites would cry out to God and he would raise up judges to save them. This cycle continues throughout the book of Judges (2:11-19).

Ezra: Ezra 7:1-6, 9:1-10:17, Nehemiah 8:1-10:39, 13:1-31.

Ezra is a scribe and priest with two goals —to understand the law of God and to teach the law to others (7:10). From studying the law and the destruction of Jerusalem and exile he realizes the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. He concludes that they were punished because they have not kept the law, and the failure to remain separate from the people is the most serious of their offences. In effect, he feels if they keep others out they can remain pure (9:10-14). This concern for keeping of the law is expressed in Nehemiah 13:25,28 as he not only obeys the law himself but makes others do the same even if it takes violence.

Samson: Judges 13:1-16:31

Samson is chosen by God before birth to save Israel from the Philistines. In 16:4-22 he falls in love with Delilah, a Philistine woman, and she betrays him.