

EZRA

Please turn in your Bibles this evening to Ezra chapter 4 as we continue our study through the Word of God. As we saw last week in our study of the book of Ezra, the Babylonian captivity had come to an end as the Babylonians fell to the Persian Empire in 539 B. C. Then, under the reign of King Cyrus, a decree was made in 538 B. C. to allow the Jews to return home and rebuild their Temple. And so, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, 49,897 people, out of the 2 to 3 million that were in Babylon, returned home.

And we saw that the foundation of the Temple was laid and the young men, those who did not see the glory of Solomon's Temple, shouted with joy to see the place of worship being rebuilt. Then the old men who saw the glory of Solomon's Temple were weeping over this low budget project. But because of all the noise, they could not discern the shouts of joy from the weeping of the people.

And with the Temple being rebuilt, with the work of God going forward, what do you think will happen next? That is right, the enemy will come in and try to stop it, put a halt to it. That is where we will pick up our story in Ezra chapter 4 starting in verse 1 as the Temple work continues on and the enemy is ready to put an end to it.

EZRA 4**VERSES 1-2**

1. As they are rebuilding the Temple we see that adversaries or enemies of Judah and Benjamin arise. Who are these people? Keep in mind that the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 721 B. C. And the Assyrians allowed other people to re-settle in the area, along with some of the Jews who were left behind. And as they dwelt in the area of Samaria, God sent lions into the land, killing some of them because they did not fear the Lord. So they sent word to the king of Assyria saying that they did not know the various rituals of the God of this land, as they believed in local deities. And they felt that since they did not know the God of this land that this God sent lions to kill them! So they requested a priest to be sent to them to teach them the things they needed to do. And these priests knew of the rituals, and taught the people to fear the Lord, but they truly did not know the Lord. How do I know that for sure? Because of what we are told in II Kings 17:41, which says, “**So these nations feared the LORD, yet served their carved images. . . .**”

We also need to keep in mind that these foreigners who were placed in the land by the Assyrians married some of the Jews who were in the land and this mix of people were the forefathers of the New Testament Samaritans. And so these people with this strange mixture of Judaism and paganism, approach Zerubbabel, asking if they could join them in the work.

2. There was a lot of work to be done and to have extra people who could help, that would be a blessing, wouldn't it? Not at all and I will tell you why. First of all notice that these are adversaries or enemies that are asking to help, it does not say friends! Secondly, the enemy only comes to stop or destroy a work of God, not help it. And the enemy will use deception to do what he can to halt this work.

You see, the enemy's tricks are always the same. Initially, he persecutes. And when that doesn't work, he tries to join forces with us. Look and study church history. As you do you will see that in the Roman Empire there was extreme persecution, brutality against Christians! But that did not stop the spread of Christianity; in fact, this persecution helped to spread Christianity across the whole known world in just some 30 years!

And you know what the enemy did next. He made Christianity the state religion under Constantine and that was not good. You see, the greatest peril to Christianity is not persecution, it is prosperity! We're lulled to sleep. So Satan changed his strategy to something much more devastating. Instead of fighting the church, he decided to join it. As he attempted here, he seeks to mix religion with culture and compromise. And that has proven to be a very effective tactic to this day.

This is exactly what we see this happening today in the church, where the church partners with unsaved people for the work of God. We have Pro-Life groups that partner with Catholics, Mormons, conservatives, anyone and everyone they can because they feel that numbers are important. That is wrong. By doing that you are saying that unless we have a good number of people, the work of God will stop. God does not need a large group of people, He desires faithful people who love Him to do the work and He can accomplish it with only one person!

We have Christians partnering with popular people who are not Christians, like Glenn Beck, who is a Mormon, for the cause of supporting Israel and taking this country back for God, but what God is Glenn Beck speaking of?

Paul warns us of this in II Corinthians 11:13-15 when he says, **“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”** As Christians we need to wise up and be aware of how deceptive he can be as he works through man. I believe God is giving us a warning here to wise up, to be on guard, to not be unequally yoked with unbelievers in the work of God!

VERSE 3

1. I am truly blessed as I read this and the reason is simple. Notice the unity in the decision that was made. The political leader, Zerubbabel; the religious leader, Joshua; and the rest of the heads of the families all agreed that they could not join in this work. Today many churches have splits over the color of the carpet to put in. To deal with something as divisive as this, well, that does not go over too well. But the children of God were not into this ecumenical movement that was not based in God but in the gods!

2. And think about what they did here and you know what they would be called today? They would be called un-loving, hateful, rude and-so-on. That is not the case at all. They did not need help in doing the work of God with those who were unsaved. God does not need that kind of help with His plans. These adversaries are much like the liberals of the church today, who want to join in a work of God, not to necessarily keep it going, but to make a profit for themselves, which will in turn weaken and destroy the work. They, like us, have taken an unpopular stance for what is right, but I would rather please God than man. Morgan gives us this insight to what is going on here as he wrote, “Men of faith have often fallen into this blunder, and have associated with themselves those not sharing their faith, and therefore in the deepest sense opposed to their enterprises. These leaders were not deceived. They detected the peril.” May we be wise and learn the lesson that God is showing us here!

3. And with this we see the division between these people and the Jews. And keep in mind that these people would be known as the Samaritans. You see, once the Jews completed the Temple, after the nation was split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, these people built their own place of worship on Mount Gerizim. Thus, the division continued between them and as you get to the New Testament, the Jews would not even step foot in the area of Samaria, some 400 years after this event with Zerubbabel. (John 4:20-24). They would rather walk around this area than through it, they were seen as half-breads and not Jews at all. Today there are only some 200 Samaritans left and most, if not all, have some kind of mental dysfunction due to intermarriages. You see, they will not marry outside their own and many feel that this may be the last generation for the Samaritans.

VERSES 4-5

1. It is very easy to see that they were not friends because right after the Jews refused to allow them to rebuild the Temple; they tried to thwart the work that was to be done. They tried to discourage them, threaten them and even hire counselors to try and prevent the work from continuing. I guess they had the ACLU even back then. And this persecution continued through the reign of Cyrus all the way to the reign of Darius. Can you imagine day in and day out hearing these discouraging words, being blasted in what you are trying to do all the time and yet they held firm to their conviction. Yes, the work did stop for several years but it was eventually completed!

VERSE 6

1. Here we see the death of Cyrus, who also went by the name Cambyses and his son Ahasuerus is now the king in Persia. He is the same king we will read about in Esther. He reigned from 485 B. C. to 465 B. C. And the enemies to this work of God wrote letters to this king trying to get him to stop the work. But at this point the work continued, Ahasuerus was not swayed by this letter!

VERSES 7-16

1. Another opposition is seen under the leadership of Artaxerxes I, also known as Artaxerxes Longimanus and he reigned from 464 B. C. to 424 B. C. Again we see the enemies of the Jews write a letter this time to King Artaxerxes, and they will call for this work to stop immediately.

I believe that the Temple is completed at this time and they may have started on the walls of the city, but it was nowhere near completion. And what this letter was doing was mixing truths with lies. Yes the Jews were a rebellious people but not now. They were sent back home by Cyrus and they have done nothing to show they are rebelling against the Persians. But when you speak lies with enough truth, people don't see the lie! And this letter was not sent because they cared at all for the king and his kingdom, but just to stop the work!

2. How does that relate to us today? That is exactly what the enemy does with us today, he speaks lies and truth and we become confused. How does he do this? It is really very simple. He tells us that we are great sinners, which is true. But then he says that God does not love us because of that, that He has forsaken us because of what we did, that we lost our salvation because of our actions and we listen to him. Remember what Paul said in Ephesians 6 when he is speaking of putting on the armor of God and he says that we are to take up the helmet of salvation.

Tragically many miss the point that Paul is making here. The helmet protected your head, you mind you might say. And thus, by placing the helmet of salvation on, the enemy can't get into our minds and try to tell us that we lost it. It was a gift of God received by faith and it can't be taken away, no one can take us out of the hand of the Father and of Jesus!

There is coming a day when he will not be able to accuse us, but it is not today. In Revelation 12:10-11 we are told, **“Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.’”**

Put on the helmet of salvation that you may know you are saved and don't listen to the lies of the Devil. Yes you are a sinner but the blood of Christ has cleansed you from all unrighteousness. Thus, stand strong in the faith because of the blood of Christ that has cleansed you. Stand strong in the faith and let others see that you live what you believe. And stand strong in the faith because you love the Lord more than your life and if you do, the enemy will not defeat you!

VERSES 17-23

1. Artaxerxes checks the records and finds out what was said in this letter was correct. They caused insurrections against kings. They were a rebellious people. And at one time this nation was mighty, under the reigns of David and Solomon. In fact they themselves taxed other nations. All this information coming together was of great concern to the king. But also keep in mind that this was the past, they were not rebellious now, but the king is looking to the future and seeing that if they gain power, they may be a problem.

And so in his letter back to these men, he tells them to see to it that the work comes to a complete stop and it can't be restarted without the king's command. Again, I don't think this is speaking of the Temple but the walls and we will talk about the reason I feel that way as we look at the last verse in this chapter in a minute.

2. As this letter is read to these men, they can't wait to put a halt to the work of God. And that is how the enemy works, ready to jump on anything that will thwart the work of God. And keep in mind these were the people that wanted to help and when they were rejected, their true colors are seen.

VERSE 24

1. This verse links us back to verse 5 of this chapter. You see, the work on the Temple stopped for some 15 years and was not restarted again until the reign of Darius I, who reigned from 521 B. C. to 486 B. C. The Temple was finally completed in 515 B. C. and not during the time of Artaxerxes, when the letter we read was written.

And during that time when they were not rebuilding the Temple, they were fixing up their homes. Yes, they built the altar of sacrifice to atone for their sins, they laid the foundation of the Temple, but that is where the work stopped. Maybe they were discouraged by the opposition. Maybe they got preoccupied with their own lives and forgot about the Lord. But whatever the case, they were wrong and the prophet Haggai picks up on that.

In Haggai 1:1-11 we are told, “In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, ‘Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: ‘This people says, ‘The time has not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built.’”’ Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ‘Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?’ Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Consider your ways! You have sown much, and bring in little; You eat, but do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; And he who earns wages, Earns wages to put into a bag with holes.’ Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified,’ says the Lord. ‘You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit. For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.’”

You see, they thought they could not build the Temple of God, when in reality they could not afford not to build the house of God. They were storing things up for themselves and the reality was, the more they did the less they had. You see, the Lord was trying to get their priorities right. That He had to be first in their lives no matter what opposition came against them! What a lesson for us, to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and God will take care of the rest!

EZRA 5

VERSES 1-2

1. Here we see Haggai and Zechariah ministering to the people, encouraging them to get back to the work of restoring the Temple. And I like what I see happening here. The restoration of the Temple begins and we see not only Zerubbabel and Joshua assisting in the work, but so are the prophets of God, Haggai and Zechariah. They not only told the people what they needed to do, but they rolled up their sleeves and got involved with the work. Too many leaders are all talk and no action. They think they are around to be served, but the reality is we are here to serve. Yes as pastors our primary focus is the study of the Word of God and prayer, but that does not mean we are not to get our hands dirty and help with the work.

2. Now in regards to prophecy or speaking forth the words of God, Paul tells us in I Corinthians 14:3, “**But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.**” That is exactly what we are seeing here as these prophets of God spoke to the people. They were built up in the faith or edified. They begin to move in the work or they were exhorted to go forward. And they were comforted by the words that were spoken, even the rebuke, because it drew them back to God.

VERSES 3-5

1. Tattenai was governor of this region, appointed by the King of Persia, and Jerusalem was part of the area he oversaw. And once again we see people rising up to stop the work on the Temple. And they speak harshly to the people, which can be very intimidating. But if you are walking with the Lord, don’t let empty words intimidate you.

And keep in mind that Darius came to the throne during a time of conflict and struggle in his country. And so the Jews did not get permission from him to restart this work. Darius was more concerned about keeping his position as king and not the rebuilding of this Temple. And yet we see this group of people who are going to try to stop the work. And I love what the Jews told them, and I will paraphrase, “I don’t see your names of the list of builders in this project. And since you are not part of this project, we don’t have time for you. Go away and leave us alone!”

How could they take such a bold stance? They understood that the eyes of the Lord were upon them and the work they were doing. If these people wanted to send a letter, they could but it would take time and they were going to continue working. I like that, steadfastness in the work. They were determined now to complete it. May we have that kind of passion for the work of God!

VERSES 6-17

1. You have to love God's timing in this situation and the writing of this letter. Darius is now the king, the same man who was a friend of Daniel. And because of that, he sided with the Jews. This may have occurred after the incident with Daniel in the lions den where Darius saw how God was able to stop the mouths of the lions and save Daniel. These guys are going to send a letter to Darius explaining the situation, trying to get the work to stop on the Temple.

Now in this letter, which does recant the history, Tattenai does not embellish or make up lies. They wanted to know the names of those who were responsible for building this Temple and they responded by saying that they were the servants of God. In other words, "If you have a problem with what is being done, don't complain to us, God has commanded us to do this. Talk with Him!" I do like that.

2. Again, what was written in this letter was true. The Jews were taken into captivity because of their idolatry, and the Temple was destroyed. Then Cyrus gave a decree to allow them to return home and rebuild the house of God. Also the articles that were taken from the Temple were to be returned. The foundation of the Temple was laid, and some of the work done, but it had not been completed yet. And we are not sure if these men did not believe what the Jews were saying or that even if there was such a record to allow them to rebuild the Temple, they would not be able to find it. And thus, they are asking Darius to check the records to see if their claims are true.

EZRA 6

VERSES 1-2

1. Here we see that as Darius receives and reads this letter he then begins the search for this decree made by Cyrus. And this scroll with the decree from Cyrus was located in Achmetha (also called Ecbatana) which was located some 300 miles northwest of Babylon. That tells me that king Darius did some searching for this scroll and maybe he did not want to make a foolish mistake as he did with his decree which caused Daniel to be cast into the lions den.

2. We are going to see that Darius reads this letter and sends back a portion of this letter to Tattenai along with his response to this letter. First let's look at this letter from Cyrus that was found.

VERSES 3-5

1. Here we see in this letter by Cyrus the command to rebuild the Temple and the support for this work. For Tattenai and the opposition, what they thought would work out to their benefit, is going to come back and bite them.

2. Let me make this one point before we move on. When we are attacked by the enemy, when we become discouraged in the work because we have listened to the insults of the enemy, may we do what these people did, what the Lord did against Satan, and say, “It is written. I am forgiven, the price has been paid by Jesus” and then continue in the work with a new strength that can only come from the Lord because you trusted in Him and His Word!

VERSES 6-12

1. Not exactly what the opposition wanted to hear! These guys wrote to Darius so he would make a decree that the work was to stop, but instead Darius issues a decree for the work to continue and the Temple to be rebuilt. Tattenai and his people were to leave the Jews alone, to stay away from them so the work could be completed. No more harassment. Also, the taxes that were collected from the area were to be given for this Temple project, and they were to waste no time in giving this money. Lastly, Darius tells them to give the Jewish people whatever they need, animals for sacrifice, grain, oil, salt, wine, without fail. Talk about God turning the tables on these guys. They meant the letter for harm and God turned it around and used it for good!

2. And Darius doesn't pull any punches here. He makes this decree and if anyone goes against it they will be put to death and their homes will be destroyed. This was a very good incentive program for all to obey. And the reality is, you would be a fool if you did not obey this decree. How is the opposition going to respond to what Darius said? We don't have to guess because the next verse tells us.

VERSE 13

1. These guys were no fools. They read the decree and “**diligently did according to what king Darius**” had said. You can't fight against God and win and you may think that you have won, but in the end, you will find out you were not even close.

VERSES 14-15

1. The Temple was completed in 515 B. C., some 21 years after they first began, back in 536 B. C. And keep in mind that this mention of Artaxerxes is not related to the Temple being rebuilt but the restoration of the walls of the city by Nehemiah.

VERSES 16-22

1. The Temple is dedicated, the Passover is celebrated, and what a joyous time it must have been for these 49,897 people that returned to the land that God had given to them.

2. Something that I think is interesting is found in verse 17 which says, “**... and as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.**” Why did they offer 12 goats for a sin offering? There was one for each of the tribes of Israel. They saw Israel as a unified nation. These people, out of the 2 to 3 million who remained in Babylon, had a heart for God and for each other. It is as Psalm 133:1 says, “**Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity!**” And one other thing in regarding this verse, there were no lost tribes of Israel and yet, even today, you hear people speak of the ten tribes as if they were lost!

3. They also separated themselves from the filth of the nations around them. They did not allow it to defile them. In the New Testament we read in I Peter 2:11-12, “**Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.**”

Several years ago I met someone that was supposed to be a Christian. He was into drugs, alcohol and was in the process of getting a divorce and already living with his girlfriend. God does not need that kind of advertising. God has called us to be a holy people, a people separated unto Him. Not perfect, but striving by God’s Spirit to walk as He has called us to walk. These people had separated themselves from the filth around them, and it was not easy, but they made a conscious decision to flee from those things that will war against their soul, and so must we!

4. Now as we move into chapter 7 of Ezra we are going to see the return of Ezra with other Jews who were coming home.

EZRA 7

VERSES 1-5

1. Now we need to understand that between chapters 6 and 7 there has been some 57 years that have passed by, which puts us around 457 B. C., and here Ezra is introduced. And in his introduction, he gives us his genealogy, linking him to Aaron, which establishes his right to be a priest. Keep in mind that back in chapter 2 of Ezra some of the priests had lost their genealogies and because they could not prove they were from the priestly lineage, they could not serve in the Temple nor do their priestly duties. Ezra is making it very clear that he has every right to be a priest.

2. According to tradition, Ezra compiled together many of the books of the Old Testament. And since he could not do his priestly duties, since he was in captivity, away from the Temple, he poured himself into the study of the Word of God. In fact it is believed that he set up what we see in the New Testament, with the structure of Synagogue worship. They would read a portion of Scripture and then the elders would give their interpretation. It is out of these oral traditions and interpretations that the Talmud and Mishnah came forth.

VERSE 6

1. Not only was he a priest but also a Scribe who knew the Words of God as he poured his life into the study of them. A Scribe also made copies of the Word of God and they went through pain-stakingly strict guidelines to ensure the proper copying of the Word of God.

Now here's the thing. When Ezra was in captivity he could have been mad at God. He could have pouted and had a pity party for himself. But he didn't, he poured himself into the Word of God! And he spent years preparing and now it was time to move. I wonder the things that God has for us even though at this present time we feel boxed in, captive you might say. Don't become angry, bitter, don't pout but pour yourself into the Word of God and see what He will do in you and through you!

VERSES 7-10

1. This was about a 900 mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem and it took 4 months to complete, as they would average about 7 miles a day, and a little more if they did not travel on the Sabbath, about 9 miles per day.

2. And I want you to notice what Ezra was doing. He made a conscious decision to follow the Lord. It was not easy but that was his hearts desire. We can take that truth and apply it to our own life. We need to make a conscious decision to follow the Lord with our whole heart, and getting into His Word is a great place to begin.

3. If you want to make an impact on others for the Lord, if you want to teach God's Word to others, you need to follow Ezra's example here. Yes, first of all you have to make a conscious decision to do it; you have to purpose in your heart. Then you must study the Word of God. Next you must take what you have learned, the things that you have studied, and apply them to your life. In other words, you must live what you say you believe. And then you can teach it. Truly those who teach effectively have studied God's Word and live it and they have purposed in their hearts to follow the Lord!

VERSES 11-16

1. Here is a copy of a letter that Ezra will take back to Jerusalem with him from King Artaxerxes. And in this letter he is saying that all who want to go back to Jerusalem with Ezra are free to go. Not only that, but much wealth is given to him as he begins this journey.

VERSES 17-22

1. Once again we see that Ezra will take back with him much wealth and the king encourages him to spend the money wisely. Again, Ezra's focus is not really the Temple; it has been already built, although he will be beautifying it. His focus though is the restoration of the people back to God. And Artaxerxes is going to send some gifts back with Ezra for the work but not because of his love for the Lord. He wants to make sure that he does not offend the God of Israel and have the wrath of God come upon him and his family and we will see that in the next verse.

VERSE 23

1. As I have said, Artaxerxes did not love the Lord God of Israel, but like the other monarchs of the Persian Empire, he wanted just to placate them and not just the God of Israel, but all gods that they encountered. In his mind it was a safe and good policy to have and many are like that today. They don't want to offend any of the gods that are out there and they in turn offend the true and living God by what they are doing!

VERSES 24-26

1. Way back here we see this pagan king make a decree that all those who were serving in the Temple were to be tax exempt. You see, their focus was on the Lord and to tax them would put a heavy burden upon them.

2. We also see that God gave this priest, Ezra, wisdom and he is encouraging Ezra to use it and to execute judgment upon those who rebel against God, the king recognized this in the life of Ezra!

VERSES 27-28

1. They haven't left yet but now Ezra is encouraged as he gets ready to make this long and hard journey. He is strengthened by God's hand upon him and those that would return with him. And keep in mind that Temple has been rebuilt, but now they will beautify it because of the resources that the king had given to them. And next week we will see Ezra's return to Jerusalem and his exhorting the people to get right with God, to separate themselves unto the Lord.

2. Let me close with this thought. In Ephesians 3:16-21 Paul reminds us, **“That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”**

May we remember that it is Christ who strengthens us in the inner man! It is Christ who opens the doors of opportunity for us to walk through! It is Christ who enables us to do the things He wants us to do! You see, once we understand that it changes our perspective of things and it is not about us, but it is all about Him who wants to bless us, to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think to all generations! May we remember that and walk by faith knowing that!