

## Ezra 4-5 HINDERING THE WORK

Good evening and thank you for joining us tonight. Would you please turn in your bibles to Ezra 4?

If you recall from last weeks study, the foundation for the 2nd temple has been laid. The work is progressing. Construction is moving along, and you can be sure that whenever God begins to build, Satan tries to destroy.

Any work for God would be easy if it weren't for opposition. In fact, from this point onwards right to the end of Nehemiah there is conflict.

Warren Wiersbe writes, "As soon as God starts to bless, the enemy starts to battle!"

In Ezra 4, Zerubbabel's enemies try different tactics to hinder the work of rebuilding the Temple. We're gonna study chapter 4-5, and the title of tonights message is HINDERING THE WORK

### LET'S PRAY

**1 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the LORD God of Israel,** The noise from the dedication ceremony at the end of Ezra 3 got the attention of the people in the land, alerting them that the returning Jews were serious about re-establishing a permanent presence in Judea.

2 they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers' houses, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." Now when the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC, the Assyrian king took the people of the northern kingdom and scattered them throughout the world, and they had brought other people that they had conquered and settled them in the land of the northern kingdom of Israel. 2 Kings 17:24 Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities. 25 And it was so, at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they did not fear the LORD; therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which killed some of them. 26 So they spoke to the king of Assyria, saying, "The nations whom you have removed and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the rituals of the God of the land; therefore He has sent lions among them, and indeed, they are killing them because they do not know the rituals of the God of the land." 27 Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, "Send there one of the priests whom you brought from there; let him go and dwell there, and let him teach them the rituals of the God of the land." 28 Then one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the LORD. 29 However every nation continued to make gods of its own, and put them in the shrines on the high places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities where they dwelt.

And so they feared Jehovah, but they worshiped their own gods. Now eventually these people intermarried with the Jews who had remained in the land after they were conquered. Their descendants became the Samaritans, a mixed breed racially and religiously.

Now look at what they say to the returning Hebrews. We worship the same God, and have sacrificed to Him. But there's a problem-the temple has been destroyed for 70 years, so how did they do their sacrifices?

This means they sacrificed without either a temple or a priesthood, which was obviously against the commandment of God. This contradicted their claim, "we seek your God as you do."

**3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers' houses of Israel said to them, "You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."** They almost sound rude, but Zerubbabel and Jeshua are very much aware of the danger of being unequally yoked with unbelievers.

Lots of folks think that Satan is this little guy running around with horns and a pitchfork, with a menacing face and an evil shrieking laugh. But that's not the case...

**2 Cor 11 12 But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast. 13 For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming**

themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. 15 Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

The enemies of God will even approach us from a friendly posture, with kind words, and seemingly good intentions, sometimes even in the name of the Lord. Satan infiltrates to contaminate. Jesus warns us in **John 10:10**, “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

When it becomes apparent Satan can't wipe out a move of God, or even a church, Satan then tries to join it.

And when you study church history you see that Satan often does much more damage from within the church than he does persecuting the church. This is why Paul warned the church at Ephesus **Acts 20 29** For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Now it would be great if the church would maintain that same attitude that Zerubabel and Jeshua had. We don't need the help of the world in doing the work of God. But not all churches see it that way, and many are trying to use the world's methods to help them in their building programs or whatever. But God doesn't

need any help in accomplishing His program, especially from those who are not true servants of God.

So here Zerubbabel shows great wisdom and discernment, realizing that if their commitment to God did not include a commitment to obey His will-to be the only God they worship, it would lead to endless issues, frustration and conflict.

Lets read v 3 one more time

**3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers' houses of Israel said to them, "You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."** Think about this moment. There's not alot of Hebrews, and along comes this group saying they want to volunteer, to help. The Hebrews lacked both human and financial resources-the task at hand was daunting.

This was an important step of faith to refuse a partnership that might have seemed helpful. We can't say for sure, but I would imagine that there were a few Hebrews among them who said, "We need any help we can get. We can guard ourselves against ungodly influences they may bring."

In weak or early circumstances of a building work there is often a serious temptation to take any help available and to ignore the dangers of unwise and ungodly partnerships.

4-5

4 Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building,  
5 and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. Now we see their true intentions don't we? If they couldn't attack the work through a supposed partnership, they would then attack the work by discouraging the workers.

The enemies of God flood Zerubbabel with hindrances and irritations – zoning ordinances, special use permits, building code compliances – anything just to irritate the Jews and try to cause them to conclude it isn't worth the hassle.

One of my favorite verses is

**Song of Solomon 2:15 Catch us the foxes,  
The little foxes that spoil the vines,  
For our vines have tender grapes.**

In other words, the daily distractions take the highest toll. The constant friction does the most damage to our resolve.

**SHOW PIC** Did you know that scientists estimate that the earth's termite population outweighs the earth's human population two to one? Imagine! There're a lot of termites out there trying to eat away the wood in your house **CLOSE PIC**

And there're a lot of little irritations trying to eat away at our God-given joy, and contentment, and peace of mind. Discouragement is one of Satans most prominent tools.

Btw what we're reading is very similar to what happens in Nehemiah.

So their attempts fail to discourage the Hebrews, so now the adversaries write inflammatory letters to the kings of Persia.

6-7

6 In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. 7 In the days of Artaxerxes also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, and the rest of their companions wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the letter was written in Aramaic script, and translated into the Aramaic language. Starting at Ezra 4:8 and continuing all the way until Ezra 6:18, everything is written in Aramaic (instead of Hebrew);

8-9

8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes in this fashion: 9 From Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions—representatives of the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the people of Persia and Erech and Babylon and Shushan, the Dehavites, the Elamites, 10 and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnapper took captive and settled in the cities of Samaria and the remainder beyond the River—and so forth. that's a long return address for a letter!

11-13

11 (This is a copy of the letter that they sent him)

To King Artaxerxes from your servants, the men of the region beyond the River, and so forth:[fn]

12 Let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem, and are building the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing its walls and repairing the foundations. 13 Let it now be known to the king that, if this city is built and the walls completed, they will not pay tax, tribute, or custom, and the king's treasury will be diminished. Not much has changed – in order to inspire change, they first go to the money.

14 Now because we receive support from the palace, it was not proper for us to see the king's dishonor; therefore we have sent and informed the king, 'We're looking out for you o king'

15-16

15 that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. And you will find in the book of the records and know that this city is a rebellious city, harmful to kings and provinces, and that they have incited sedition within the city in former times, for which cause this city was destroyed.

16 We inform the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, the result will be that you will have no dominion beyond the River. The Samaritans are smart—they call attention to Jerusalem's sinful past. They argued that allowing the building of the temple to continue would make it so that the king of Persia would have no dominion beyond the River, meaning that Persia would lose this territory.



This letter was a skillful combination of truth and lies. It was true that Jerusalem had a sinful past; yet with these returned exiles, it truly was the past and not the present.

However, that truth was completely irrelevant because of the great lie — the lie that the Jews and the builders of Jerusalem had a rebellious intent.

In a similar way our adversaries — Satan and his angels, the enemies of our soul — often attack us with a combination of truth and lies.

They repeatedly remind us of our sins, and failures. Satan also accuses us before God **Revelation 12:10 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.**

It’s important that we remember the truth of Jesus’ love for us! Realize it is never God who condemns **Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,[fn] who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.**

Yes, the Holy Spirit convicts. But the condemnation of Satan causes you to cease your work, whereas the conviction of the Spirit will always motivate you to continue it.

So the king gets this letter...

17 The king sent an answer:

To Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, to the rest of their companions who dwell in Samaria, and to the remainder beyond the River:

Peace, and so forth.[fn]

18 The letter which you sent to us has been clearly read before me. 19 And I gave the command, and a search has been made, and it was found that this city in former times has revolted against kings, and rebellion and sedition have been fostered in it. 20 There have also been mighty kings over Jerusalem, who have ruled over all the region beyond the River; and tax, tribute, and custom were paid to them. The Persian king recognized that back in its heyday, Judah was a powerful nation that ruled over others, and imposed taxes and tribute on their neighbors. So now the kings wheels are turning-he's concerned Judah could return to its former powerful might.

21 Now give the command to make these men cease, that this city may not be built until the command is given by me. The letter from the Samaritan adversaries was successful. Artaxerxes king of Persia, perhaps the most powerful man in the world at that time, commanded that the work be stopped.

22 Take heed now that you do not fail to do this. Why should damage increase to the hurt of the kings? 23 Now when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem

against the Jews, and by force of arms made them cease. 24 Thus the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem ceased, and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. Construction of the Temple ends up shut down for about 15 years. The foundation was laid in 535 BC. The work ceased shortly thereafter, and was not resumed until 520 BC.

During this time, Nehemiah of the Jews, Artaxerxes cupbearer comes from Babylon, and they rebuild the wall in 52 days. But the temple lays in ruins.

And Artaxerxes sends Nehemiah back to Babylon and blesses the rebuilding of the wall. So you would think that temple work would resume too right? No.

And the people, instead of going to build the temple, then focus on their own houses. Haggai 1:3 Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, 4 “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple[fn] to lie in ruins?” 5 Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways!

6 “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.”

7 Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways! 8 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. 9 "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.

The israelites got lazy and when they had the opportunity after this forced stoppage to resume building the temple, they focused on their own houses instead.

1 Then the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophets, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. Though work on the Temple had ceased, God went to work on His people. He sent two prophets to encourage them and keep the flame of hope alive.

This setback must've deflated Zerubbabel. But the Lord gives him a word through the prophet Zechariah...

Zechariah 4:6 So he answered and said to me:

"This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel:  
'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,'  
Says the LORD of hosts.

7 'Who are you, O great mountain?  
Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain!  
And he shall bring forth the capstone

With shouts of “Grace, grace to it!” ’ ”

8 Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying:

9 “The hands of Zerubbabel

Have laid the foundation of this temple;[fn]

His hands shall also finish it.

Then you will know

That the LORD of hosts has sent Me to you.

10 For who has despised the day of small things?

For these seven rejoice to see

The plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

They are the eyes of the LORD,

Which scan to and fro throughout the whole earth.”

Zerubbabel will succeed and finish the temple work.

But until then, Zerubbabel needs faith and patience. God’s work is spiritual work, and we must rely on the power of the Spirit.

So we see that for the Jews, the problem was simply wrong priorities. They were content to let the cause of the Lord suffer at the expense of their comfort. They were focused on themselves before the work of the Lord.

Haggai’s prophecy was a more direct encouragement to get busy on the work of building the temple; Zechariah’s prophecy was mostly directed to the spiritual condition of the returned exiles.

If all we had was Haggai to go by, we might conclude that all God was really interested in was the temple. Zechariah gives the rest of the story, and shows how God is interested in lives, not only buildings.

2 So Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak<sup>[fn]</sup> rose up and began to build the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them, helping them. Zerubbabel was the civil leader, Jeshua was the priest, the religious leader. Both joined forces to resume work on the Temple.

3 At the same time Tattenai the governor of the region beyond the River<sup>[fn]</sup> and Shethar-Boznai and their companions came to them and spoke thus to them: “Who has commanded you to build this temple and finish this wall?” So again we see opposition come up against the work of God. This was the man appointed by the king of Persia to govern the province that included Judea.

4 Then, accordingly, we told them the names of the men who were constructing this building. 5 But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them cease till a report could go to Darius. Then a written answer was returned concerning this matter. God's hand was upon them, there would be no stoppage.

6-7

6 This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai sent:

The governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and his companions, the Persians who were in the region beyond the River, to Darius the king.

7 (They sent a letter to him, in which was written thus)

To Darius the king:

**All peace.** The letter presents a brief history of Judah and its downfall. We've studied all this recently, how Nebuchadnezzar toppled the Temple, the Jews were exiled in Babylon, until Cyrus issued the command to return and rebuild.

8 Let it be known to the king that we went into the province of Judea, to the temple of the great God, which is being built with heavy stones, and timber is being laid in the walls; and this work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands.

9 Then we asked those elders, and spoke thus to them: "Who commanded you to build this temple and to finish these walls?" 10 We also asked them their names to inform you, that we might write the names of the men who were chief among them. Now remember, this letter is sent to Darius, and this is king Darius who loved Daniel. Daniel sat with him many times. Had long conversations about God and the power of God.

11-17

11 And thus they returned us an answer, saying: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of

Israel built and completed. 12 But because our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and carried the people away to Babylon. 13 However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to build this house of God. 14 Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple that was in Jerusalem and carried into the temple of Babylon—those King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. 15 And he said to him, 'Take these articles; go, carry them to the temple site that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its former site.' 16 Then the same Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem; but from that time even until now it has been under construction, and it is not finished."

17 Now therefore, if it seems good to the king, let a search be made in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon, whether it is so that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send us his pleasure concerning this matter. Letter says-hey king confirm-do you want this done-is this approved.

Doubtful that Zerubbabel knew God was using Daniel to minister to Darius at this time.

We see God's faithfulness woven throughout the tapestry. We have no idea what the Lord is doing, but we must trust Him.