

## LESSON 12

When we ended last week, we were in the middle of a parenthetical section in which Ezra is giving some other examples of how the Jews' trouble making neighbors were causing problems for them. One way they did that was to send false reports back to the king, as they did during the reign of Artaxerxes.

The actual text of their letter appears in verses 11-16.

### Ezra 4:11-16

11 This is the copy of the letter that they sent unto him, even unto Artaxerxes the king; Thy servants the men on this side the river, and at such a time. 12 Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations. 13 Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings. 14 Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace, and it was not meet for us to see the king's dishonour, therefore have we sent and certified the king; 15 That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers: so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time: for which cause was this city destroyed. 16 We certify the king that, if this city be builded again, and the walls thereof set up, by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side the river.

At this point, we should probably pause and consider an important reminder about inspiration. Yes, the Bible is the inspired word of God, but not every statement in the Bible is true.

For example, the statement by Satan to Eve in Genesis 3:4 ("You will not surely die") was not a true statement. (It directly contradicted what God said in Genesis 2:17.) While inspiration tells us that Satan made that statement in Genesis 3:4, the statement itself is false.

Likewise here, inspiration tells us that these verses accurately record the contents of this letter, but as for the statements in the letter, we know that the letter contains false accusations, false statements, and false concern for the king's welfare. The contents of this letter are not inspired statements from God. All that inspiration tells us about this letter is that Ezra accurately reported it (just as Moses

accurately recorded the words of Satan in Genesis 3).

“The whole letter is inflammatory and a gross exaggeration and cannot be used to determine Jewish activity other than the fact that some building was underway.”

The phrase “from thee to us” in verse 12 suggests that the Jews under discussion here were the ones who first came from the king himself, which would be Ezra’s group who returned in 458. (Because Nehemiah had a specific royal mandate to rebuild the city, this letter complaining about rebuilding efforts could not refer to his return.)

In Nehemiah 1:3, Nehemiah received news that the wall was broken down and the gates burned. That may have been the wall that was started here, and its destruction may have been the result of Artaxerxes’ reply in verses 18-22.

Remember that we have moved forward in time here in Ezra 4. The foundations in verse 12 are not the foundations of the temple. By the reign of Artaxerxes, the new temple had been standing for half a century. Instead, verse 12 is talking about the foundations of the city.

The word “Jews” in verse 12 is interesting. Today we use that word to refer to the entire Hebrew ethnicity, but that was not always the case. The word itself comes from Judah, just one of the twelve tribes, and later came to apply to the two Southern tribes, which also included Benjamin. (Simeon was also located in the South, but that tribe was divided and scattered and eventually absorbed into Judah. Jacob had said in Genesis 49:7 that Simeon would be divided and scattered.) Here in verse 12, the word “Jew” applies to the entirety of the race, and it may have been one of the first such uses of the word.

Three different words for taxes are used in verse 13. (Some things never change!) They refer to a monetary tax, a payment in kind (oil, grain, etc.), and a duty tax. After his costly campaign against the Greeks, Artaxerxes could not afford to overlook any revenue. The opposition here played on the king’s fears that he might lose revenue or perhaps even lose the whole western province (verse 16). Of course, there is no mention of their true motives, which were not to help the king collect taxes or keep his kingdom intact!

Estimates suggest that between 20 to 35 million dollars worth of taxes were collected annually by the Persian king. The Fifth Satrapy, which included Palestine, had to pay the smallest amount of the western satrapies. The Persians took much of the gold and silver coins and melted them down to be stored as bullion. Very little of the taxes returned to benefit the provinces. (Again, not much has

changed!)

The phrase “we have maintenance from the king’s palace” in verse 14 is literally “we have eaten the salt of the palace,” which is how the ESV renders it. Salt was often used to seal covenants, and so came to symbolize loyalty. “Eating the salt of” was an idiom for “being in the service of” or “receiving a salary from.” Our word “salary” comes from the Latin word *salarium*, which means “salt money.”

The Persian kings considered themselves the successors of the Babylonian kings, which is why the Babylonian kings are referred to as their fathers or predecessors in verse 15.

The book of records in verse 15 will play a major role in the book of Esther. What would it contain that is relevant to this letter? It described many revolts by the Jews! Revolts by Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, and possibly even by Hezekiah. In short, this book would not have helped the Jewish cause – and we know that it did not help their cause. Verse 19 tells us that these records were behind the response that came back from the king.

Verses 17-22 give us the king’s reply to the letter in verses 11-16.

## Ezra 4:17-22

17 Then sent the king an answer unto Rehum the chancellor, and to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their companions that dwell in Samaria, and unto the rest beyond the river, Peace, and at such a time. 18 The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me. 19 And I commanded, and search hath been made, and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made therein. 20 There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them. 21 Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me. 22 Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?

Letters took about a week to travel back and forth between Samaria and Persia.

Apparently, the king believes that the threats against his reign are genuine, and so he orders that the rebuilding efforts be stopped. As we suggested, one reason the king may have taken this threat seriously was because of the brewing trouble nearby in Egypt.

But this response by Artaxerxes raises the question of contradictory orders – how could this be the same king who would later send Nehemiah to rebuild the walls?

The answer is in verse 21 – the king said that the city would not be rebuilt “until another commandment shall be given from me.”

Esther 8:8 and Daniel 6:8 tell us that “an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked.” What that means is that without this providential addition, Nehemiah would have had a very difficult time getting the king’s approval for his plans to rebuild.

The situation that moved Nehemiah to pray and act may have been the same discouraging events described here.

## Ezra 4:23

23 Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes’ letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power.

In verse 22, the king had ordered the Jewish adversaries to “take heed now that ye fail not to do this” act of stopping the rebuilding. That is one order the king certainly did not need to worry about being followed!

Verse 23 tells us that the adversaries showed no slackness at all in obeying the king’s command – they went in haste to do so. (But isn’t that always the way with troublemakers! They are seldom slothful!)

Proverbs 6:18 tells us that one of the things that God hates is “feet that be swift in running to mischief.”

By force and power the adversaries of the Jews caused the rebuilding to end. They likely also destroyed the work that had already been done, which may be the destruction reported in Nehemiah 1:3 – “the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire.”

Notice that the king had told them only to halt the rebuilding – he had not given them permission to destroy what had already been rebuilt, but that seems to have been what they did.

This was not the only time that God's people were met by force and power. But both they and we need to remember that no force or power can defeat God or Christ or the kingdom of Christ.

**Romans 8:31** - "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

## Ezra 4:24

24 Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The word "then" at the beginning of verse 24 sounds as if this verse is describing what happened after verse 23, but we know that can't be the case because Darius in verse 24 reigned before Artaxerxes. Instead, as we discussed earlier, verses 6-23 should have parentheses or brackets around them. That parenthetical statement was inserted by Ezra to show the real attitude of those who offered their help in verse 2 and to show the depth of their adversity against the Jews. Verse 24 is now simply picking up from verse 5, which also mentions Darius.

And so the work that had started under King Cyrus has now ceased because of the opposition of the Jews' neighbors. That work would remain halted through the remainder of Cyrus' reign and through the reigns of Cambyses II and Smerdis. It would not begin again until the second year of Darius the Great's reign, which would be in 520 – the same year that Haggai and Zechariah began to preach about the people's neglect of the temple rebuilding project. The work would be completed five years later in 515.

This date in verse 24 of "the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" is significant. During his first two years, Darius fought numerous battles against nine rebels, as recounted in his famous Behistun Inscription. Only after the stabilization of the Persian Empire could efforts to rebuild the temple be permitted.

Darius consolidated the administration of the vast Persian Empire, setting up satraps, introducing coinage, and establishing the famous royal road from Susa to Sardis and a system of mounted couriers, whose description by Herodotus forms the motto of the U.S. postal system – "These are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed."

Chapter 4 ends on a discouraging note – “Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem.” We will see a change of heart in Chapter 5, and, as with all such changes of heart, it will begin with the proclamation of God’s word.

## Ezra 5:1-2

Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them. 2 Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them.

There is a jump in time between the beginning of Ezra 4 and the beginning of Ezra 5. When Chapter 5 opens, work on the temple has now been stopped for about 16 years after it was started at the beginning of Chapter 4.

How do we know that? Because the last verse of Chapter 4 tells us that we are now in the second year of King Darius, which is 520 BC. Also, we can look at the book of Haggai, who is mentioned in verse 1. Haggai 1:1 begins with the same date as Ezra 4:24 – “In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month.”

At the beginning of Chapter 4, we were in the reign of Cyrus. At the beginning of Chapter 5, we are now in the reign of Darius. The two Persian kings in between, Cambyses II and Smerdis, have come and gone. Cambyses died on his way back from Egypt rushing to remove the supposed imposter, Smerdis. That imposter was soon killed by Darius the Great, who then took the throne. The Behistun Inscription shows Darius with his foot on Smerdis. At the beginning of Ezra 5, we are in the second year of Darius’ reign.

It seems that the Jews had used the opposition of their neighbors as an excuse to do nothing for God’s house, and instead had turned their focus to building their own houses. It seems that they had given in to the fear we saw in Ezra 3:3 and to the discouragement we saw in Ezra 4:4-5.

We find from Haggai and Zechariah that the people had set aside spiritual concerns in favor of physical concerns. What was the cure for that fear? What was the cure for that discouragement? Simple – the bold proclamation of the word of God.

Haggai and Zechariah declared God’s word to the people, and, as we will see, God’s word woke them

from their stupor and cured their fear and their discouragement. If we experience fear and discouragement today, the solution is the same – the bold proclamation of God’s word.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua in verse 2 are the same two leaders we have seen before. They are mentioned many times in Haggai and Zechariah, and, as we have discussed, Zechariah uses them as a figure of the perfect high priest and king who was to come.

Let’s pause for a moment and consider the two prophets who are mentioned in verse 1 – Haggai and Zechariah. Their preaching was so effective that work on the temple resumed almost immediately. And their books provide the backdrop and the context for Ezra 5.

## **What was the message of Haggai?**

From the opening verses of their two books, we know that Haggai began his ministry two months before Zechariah began his. Haggai preached four sermons that we know about within the space of about three months in 520 B.C., and then disappeared from public view. His short ministry was certainly a productive one!

We don’t know too much about Haggai, but Haggai 2:3 might suggest that Haggai had himself seen the original temple, in which case Haggai was likely in his 70’s and possibly older. That would also mean that Haggai had undertaken the difficult trip back to Jerusalem when he might have stayed comfortably behind in Babylon.

But as we read Haggai, we see that Haggai would have been the last person to place his own comfort ahead of his obedience to God. His message to the people was that they were placing their own comfort and prosperity ahead of God’s temple.

Was God upset because of their prosperity? We know that he was not. Why? Because in Jeremiah 29:5-7 God had commanded them to prosper while they were in Babylon. God wants his people to prosper, but for God’s people that prosperity should naturally lead to a heart of gratitude that overflows with obedience and faithfulness. For some, however, the opposite happens – their prosperity leads to a heart of pride in which they exalt their own accomplishments and forget God. Prosperity is dangerous!

These people had returned to Jerusalem with excitement and fervor, but then they had had built their homes and businesses and had settled down into a regular routine that did not include God. They had

abandoned their original commitment, and Haggai proclaimed a message from God calling them back.

Haggai wanted the people of Israel to have a changed heart, which he knew would result in changed behavior. Too often we reverse that process – we seek changed behavior in the hope that it will result in a changed heart. That works sometimes, but the other way always works. If we change our heart into a heart of obedience and faithfulness to God, then a change in behavior will always come as a result.

The theme of Haggai is captured very well by one of its most famous verses – “Consider your ways!”

Haggai 1:5-9 – Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD. Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

Haggai also contains an important lesson when it comes to purity, which is likewise a theme in Ezra. Ivory Soap may advertise that it is 99 and 44/100 percent pure, but there is a word for that – “impure.” If you start with a vat of sewage and add a teaspoon of pure water, you still have a vat of sewage. If you start with a vat of pure water and add a teaspoon of sewage, what do you have? A vat of sewage.

Haggai proclaims that same message.

Haggai 2:11-14 – If one bear holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and with his skirt do touch bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any meat, shall it be holy? And the priests answered and said, No. Then said Haggai, If one that is unclean by a dead body touch any of these, shall it be unclean? And the priests answered and said, It shall be unclean.

Haggai ends with a beautiful Messianic prophecy of the perfect king who was to come from the line of King David, through Zerubbabel.

Haggai 2:21-23 – Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I will shake the heavens and the earth; 22 And I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the



kingdoms of the heathen; and I will overthrow the chariots, and those that ride in them; and the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother. 23 In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the LORD, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the LORD of hosts.

Haggai is proclaiming these messages at the exact time of Ezra 5.

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