

## Lesson 9

Where did we end last week? It is the second month of the second year of their return from exile, and Jeshua is standing with his sons and his brethren “to set forward the workmen in the house of God.”

### Ezra 3:10-13

10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: 13 So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

Verses 10-13 show the reaction of the people when the new foundation was laid – they praised God, they sang, they gave thanks, they shouted, and they wept.

Verse 11 quotes Psalm 100:5 – “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Jeremiah prophesied about this very event in Jeremiah 33:10-11.

Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, ‘It is a waste without man or beast,’ in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again 11 the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord: “‘Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!’ For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord.”

Their hearts were full of praise and thanksgiving even though construction had just started. “True faith praises God even before the answer has materialized.” True faith prays for rain – and then carries an umbrella! They knew that temple would be rebuilt.

Verses 12-13 are touching. The older priests, Levites, and family heads who had seen and who remembered Solomon’s temple (“the first house” in verse 12) wept, presumably because of the difference between that grand edifice and the much simpler version that would now be constructed. They likely had feelings both of longing and regret. Longing for what they had lost, and regret for their sins that had caused it to be destroyed and for their inability to restore all of its former glory.

Haggai and Zechariah would preach about this same sorrowful attitude about 20 years later:

(Haggai 2:3) Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?

(Zechariah 4:10) For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

Yes, there was sadness, but joy was mixed in with that sadness. Verse 13 says that “the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.” Who do you think was listening to all of that joyful shouting? The opening verse of Chapter 4 will tell us.

## **Ezra 4**

**From Ezra 4 until the end of Nehemiah there is nothing but conflict.** We might hope that we can avoid conflict in the service of God, but, if we did, we would be the first.

From this point on, nothing that these people attempted to do for God would go unchallenged, and the same occurs today. Many just do nothing in an attempt to avoid conflict (and we will see that same attitude in Ezra), but all that strategy does is create conflict with God.

We cannot avoid conflict, and no one who makes that his driving goal does very much in the service of God. We will either be in conflict with God or in conflict with man – but we will be in conflict. It is unavoidable.

### **Ezra 4:1-3**

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel; 2 Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither. 3 But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.

The adversaries in verse 1 are the same peoples we encountered in 3:3. Those from Samaria would have included people brought by the Assyrians from elsewhere in their empire. We know that Sargon II of Assyria repopulated the Northern Kingdom, and Esarhaddon in verse 2 must have continued that same policy, including moving some into Syria-Palestine. A further resettlement by Ashurbanipal is mentioned in 4:10.

2 Kings 17:24-28 tells us about the resettlement by Sargon II and the fascinating events that followed:

24 And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from

Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof. 25 And so it was at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they feared not the LORD: therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which slew some of them. 26 Wherefore they spake to the king of Assyria, saying, The nations which thou hast removed, and placed in the cities of Samaria, know not the manner of the God of the land: therefore he hath sent lions among them, and, behold, they slay them, because they know not the manner of the God of the land. 27 Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, Carry thither one of the priests whom ye brought from thence; and let them go and dwell there, and let him teach them the manner 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.

So even these resettled Assyrians had no excuse! They had been taught how to fear God.

As we discussed, one of the themes of Ezra is the importance of maintaining purity, and we that theme here. These neighbors (already called adversaries in verse 1) approach the Israelites and tell them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do.” How often today do we hear that same ecumenical plea!

And how did the Jews respond? “Sure! Come on in! Let’s all just agree to disagree! Grab a guitar and we can all sing Kum Ba Yah! Let’s celebrate Jesus together!” No, that is not what they said at all.

What they said in verse 3 was, “Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel.”

They knew very well that these people, despite their claims, did not worship God as the Jews did. How did they know that? They had eyes! They could read God’s word, and they could observe how their neighbors worshiped – and *what* they worshipped. 2 Kings 17:33-41 tell us how they worshipped—yes, they feared God, but they also “did according to their former manner” and “served their carved images.” And that is not something God wanted his people to “agree to disagree” about!

They took the hard way. The easy way would have been to accept them and their false worship. Who knows? That might have ended the adversity with their neighbors—but it would have created adversity with God.

In fact, that hard stand almost certainly *increased* the adversity with the surrounding peoples, but there was no other place for God’s people to stand. It may have been a hard way, but for God’s people it was an easy decision.

Why did these neighbors want to join with the returned exiles? They wanted to conquer them from within – and that same motive remains today with some who would gladly join with us today if we were to throw our doors open and throw our Bibles away.

These people had a big choice, and it is a choice that comes time and time again to the people of God – will they trust in God or will they trust in man? Will they embrace their neighbors for security, or will they look to God for security? Their ancestors had often looked to Egypt for help

rather than to God – what would their descendants do? Here they made the right decision – trusting in the arm of God rather than the arm of man.

“Don’t fear doing things that the worldly might spin against you. They can spin everything against you. So go in with guns blazing. Believe the Bible. Act on principle. Love the truth. Be valiant for the truth. Speak the truth in love. Follow Jesus. Don’t worry about the way they will spin your words or your actions against you. Follow Jesus, love people, trust God, and the truth will be vindicated.”

Note that their answer in verse 3 adds something else – “as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.” Why did they say that? One reason is that Cyrus’ decree had not charged these neighbors with rebuilding the temple, and thus technical adherence to that decree would prevent them from working with those neighbors. But there must be more to it than that because we know that these exiles would not have worked with these neighbors even if Cyrus’ decree had been silent on the issue.

A more important reason to mention the decree is that these returnees knew who was behind that decree. We were told in the opening verses that God had stirred Cyrus to make that decree, and we know that it was made at the time that Jeremiah had prophesied. Also, we know that God through Isaiah had mentioned Cyrus by name hundreds of years before Cyrus was born. In short, Cyrus’ decree was God’s decree, and that is how these people saw it.

Verse 2 (“and we do sacrifice unto him”) seems to confirm that there was most likely an altar already in place before the exiles began to build their own altar, and it likewise confirms that that previous altar would have been defiled and not built according to God’s word, which means it would have been torn down before the restored altar was built.

And that is another lesson in restoration. True restoration begins by removing whatever is false. It does not seek to reform falsehood, but rather it removes falsehood – and then builds in its place that which is true.

### **Ezra 4:4-5**

4 Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, 5 And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.
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Now the knives have come out and the opposition begins in earnest. In just a moment, Ezra will look back over the history from his time to this time and illustrate other examples of opposition that occurred during that about 80 year timeframe. These examples will completely justify the response in verse 3 to the offer of help in verse 2.

The phrase “people of the land” in verse 4 is interesting. It became among the Jews a synonym for the ignorant or the vulgar with regard to knowledge of the law. Those who did not know or follow the law were called the people of the land. Today we use the word “worldly” in the same way. What is the opposite of “worldly”? Paul answers that question in Colossians 3:1-2 – “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.

Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.”

The phrase “weakened the hands” in verse 4 is the same word that was applied against Jeremiah in 38:4 by his enemies: “let this man [Jeremiah] be put to death: for thus he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words unto them: for this man seeketh not the welfare of this people, but the hurt.” There is nothing wrong with weakening the hands of those opposed to God (as Jeremiah was doing), but here it is God’s people whose hands are being weakened – and we must not let that happen.

The counselors in verse 5 were likely Persian officials bribed to obstruct the building in every possible way. Their goal was to frustrate the purposes of God’s people, and they haven’t gone anywhere!

This pressure against the Jews would continue for about 16 years (until 520 BC), and as verse 24 will show us, it was succeeded in stopping the work on the temple. And, sadly, they do not have appear to have met with much resistance by at least some of the returned exiles. Haggai will tell us that some were much more focused on their own paneled homes than they were on the house of God.

If the only reason I come to the worship service is because I haven’t received an offer from someone in the world to do something else, then I can hardly blame by faithlessness on that other person! Whether or not I remain faithful to God is my personal responsibility, and I will personally be held accountable for it.

The mention of Darius in verse 5 and again in verse 24 marks the intervening verses as an excursus. Ezra does not return to the opposition of verses 4-5 until Chapter 5. The remaining verses in Chapter 4 discuss later oppositions to the building of the walls under the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) and the reign of Artaxerxes I.

How do we know this? For starters, the text mentions those two kings: Ahasuerus in verse 6 and Artaxerxes in verse 7. Some argue that verse 6 really refers to Cambyses II and verse 7 really refers to Smerdis (the person under Darius’ foot in the Behistun Inscription). Josephus rearranged the account, placing Cambyses before Xerxes and replacing Xerxes with Artaxerxes. But none of that makes much sense to me. Rather, it seems clear that the author is simply jumping ahead a bit in the chronology to make his point.

And what was that point? We discussed that question in our introduction. Ezra had just shown how the Jews rejected the offer for help from their neighbors. In the remainder of Chapter 4 he provides further justification for that decision.

“Without a foretaste of history to reveal the full seriousness of the opposition, we would not properly appreciate the achievements recorded in the next two chapters nor the dangers hidden in the mixed marriages that Ezra would set himself to stamp out.”

## **Ezra 4:6**

6 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah

and Jerusalem.

Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I) was the Persian king who reigned from 486 until 465, following the reign of Darius I. Ahasuerus was also the husband of Queen Esther.

All verse 6 tells us is that the opposition and letter writing continued through the reign of this king. We are not told whether they received any response to this letter.

When we get to our study of Esther, we will see that Ahasuerus had some other things on his mind! When Darius died at the end of 486 B.C., Egypt rebelled. Xerxes had to march west to suppress the revolt. The Persians finally regained control by the end of 483. Xerxes is best known for his massive invasion of Greece as recounted in Herodotus. His navy and army were defeated by the Greeks at Salamis in 480 and at Plataea in 479.

Where does the name Xerxes come from? Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the Persian name Khshayarsha, for which the Greek form is Xerxes. While the Hebrews would carefully match letter for letter in coming up with the Hebrew version of a Persian name, the Greeks followed a different procedure. When Greeks couldn't pronounce a foreign name, they just came up with a new name that was more Greek sounding. By that process, perhaps I should just start referring to Ashurbanipal as Bill or Ted!

The tombs of these Persian kings are located in modern day Iran. They were looted during the days of Alexander, but the tombs themselves remain to this day.

### **Ezra 4:7-8**

7 And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue. 8 Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this sort:

Artaxerxes was the Persian king who followed Xerxes I and reigned from 464 until 424. He became king by murdering his older brother.

It was during his reign that Ezra returned in 458 and Nehemiah returned in 445. Again, we are told that the opposition continued into this king's reign, but here we are given more detail, including a copy of an actual letter sent to the king by the opponents.

A major concern during the first half of Artaxerxes' reign was the Egyptian revolt that began in 460 and that was supported by the Greeks. That revolt in nearby Egypt would have caused the king to listen very seriously to these charges of sedition in Palestine.

In Chapter 2 we saw the wall of honor. Here we see a wall of dishonor, as the Bible records the names of the opponents: Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, and Shimshai.

From verse 8 until 6:18, the text is in Aramaic (called the "Syrian tongue" in verse 7). (We also

saw a lengthy Aramaic section in Daniel.) Why the switch? Most likely it was because Ezra's source documents, the letters and the replies, were written in Aramaic – as he explicitly tell us. Since the Jews became bilingual during the exile, Ezra simply also recorded his comments on the letters in Aramaic to avoid switching back and forth.

### **Ezra 4:9-10**

9 Then wrote Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites, 10 And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest that are on this side the river, and at such a time.

Verses 9-10 probably came from the official summary of the letter that would have been located on the outside of the papyrus scroll.

The “noble Asnappar” in verse 10 is King Ashurbanipal, who ruled Assyria from 669 until 633. He was famous for his large library in Ninevah. He is not named elsewhere in the Bible but is likely the king who freed Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33.

The KJV has a mistranslation in verse 9 where it reads “the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites.” The word translated “Dehavites” really just means “that is,” so that the phrase should be “Elamites of Susa,” in contrast to the other people of Susa. Susa took part in a revolt against Ashurbanipal and was completely destroyed in 640 BC.

Many of these people were descendants of deportees who had been removed from their homelands nearly two centuries earlier – and yet they remember and stress their origins in this letter. There is no historical support for the notion today that people in the Middle East will eventually agree to just forget the past and live together in peace. In fact, the major schisms in the Middle East all trace back to events that occurred centuries ago. We often pray that our politicians will open their Bibles, and here is yet another reason why that would be a good idea!

### **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.

The text of the letter appears in verses 11-16.

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 it contains false accusations and false statements. (For starters, King Ashurbanipal in verse 10 was neither great nor noble.) 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.”

This error about inspiration is quite common. Many people, for example, pull verses out of Job to prove various points without remembering what God said about many of those verses in Job 42:7 – “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” We need to keep this point in mind as we read the letters in Ezra.

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 mandate to rebuild the city, it could not refer to his group.)

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

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.