

NOON BIBLE STUDY: EZRA 4

EZRA 4:1-3 - THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND OFFER TO HELP?

V. 1-2 - THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND OFFER TO HELP JUDAH BUILD THE TEMPLE. THESE PEOPLE HAD BEEN RESETTLED IN SAMARIA WHEN THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL WAS EXILED BY ASSYRIA. THEY APPEAL TO JUDAH BASED ON THE CLAIM "WE TOO SEEK YOUR GOD AND HAVE BEEN SACRIFICING TO HIM FOR SOME TIME..." WE SEE EVIDENCE OF THIS IN THE BIBLE, BUT WE ALSO READ THAT WHILE THESE PEOPLE SACRIFICED TO YAHWEH, THEY ALSO KEPT THEIR GOD.

2 KINGS 17:24-29 (NLT) - THE KING OF ASSYRIA TRANSPORTED GROUPS OF PEOPLE FROM BABYLON, CUTHAH, AVVA, HAMATH, AND SEPHARVAIM AND RESETTLED THEM IN THE TOWNS OF SAMARIA, REPLACING THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL. THEY TOOK POSSESSION OF SAMARIA AND LIVED IN ITS TOWNS. 25 BUT SINCE THESE FOREIGN SETTLERS DID NOT WORSHIP THE LORD WHEN THEY FIRST ARRIVED, THE LORD SENT LIONS AMONG THEM, WHICH KILLED SOME OF THEM. 26 SO A MESSAGE WAS SENT TO THE KING OF ASSYRIA: "THE PEOPLE YOU HAVE SENT TO LIVE IN THE TOWNS OF SAMARIA DO NOT KNOW THE RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS OF THE GOD OF THE LAND. HE HAS SENT LIONS AMONG THEM TO DESTROY THEM BECAUSE THEY HAVE NOT WORSHIPED HIM CORRECTLY." 27 THE KING OF ASSYRIA THEN COMMANDED, "SEND ONE OF THE EXILED PRIESTS BACK TO SAMARIA. LET HIM LIVE THERE AND TEACH THE NEW RESIDENTS THE RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS OF THE GOD OF THE LAND." 28 SO ONE OF THE PRIESTS WHO HAD BEEN EXILED FROM SAMARIA RETURNED TO BETHEL AND TAUGHT THE NEW RESIDENTS HOW TO WORSHIP THE LORD. 29 BUT THESE VARIOUS GROUPS OF FOREIGNERS ALSO CONTINUED TO WORSHIP THEIR OWN GODS. IN TOWN AFTER TOWN WHERE THEY LIVED, THEY PLACED THEIR IDOLS AT THE PAGAN SHRINES THAT THE PEOPLE OF SAMARIA HAD BUILT.

V. 3 - **THANKS BUT NO THANKS** - ZERUBBABEL AND JESHUA DECLINE THE OFFER OF THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND. IF A GENUINE OFFER, HAVING THEIR HELP MAY HAVE SPED UP THE PROGRESS OF THE PROJECT, BUT WOULD HAVE IN TURN BEEN AN UNSANCTIONED UNITY BETWEEN JUDAH AND ANOTHER NATION/PEOPLE. IT IS NOT INITIALLY CLEAR THAT GOD'S PEOPLE KNOW OF THEIR NEIGHBORS INTENTIONS, BUT THE TEXTS TELLS US THAT THEY WERE "THE ENEMIES OF JUDAH AND BENJAMIN..." (V. 1)

"IT IS EASY TO OVERLOOK OR PLAY DOWN THE DESCRIPTION OF THIS (GROUP) AS THE "ENEMIES" AND SO TO FORM AN IMPRESSION OF THE ENCOUNTER AS A RUDE REBUFF OF A SINCERE AND FRIENDLY GESTURE. INSTEAD, WE ARE MEANT TO SEE IT AS THE OPENING OF A BATTLE OF WITS: THE FIRST ROUND IN AN ASSAULT ON THE INTEGRITY OF THE NATION-CHURCH, AN ATTEMPT WHICH WOULD BE PRESSED HOME WITH EVERY KIND OF TACTIC, DISARMING OR MENACING, DEFAMATORY OR OBSTRUCTIVE, BUT ALWAYS GEARED TO THE ONE OBJECTIVE." ("TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARY: EZRA & NEHEMIAH", DEREK KINDER, PAGE 48-49)

THIS CHAPTER IS GOING TO GIVE US SOME GOOD AND PRACTICAL INSIGHT INTO THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE OF NOT JUST EZRA CHAPTER 4'S DAY, BUT OUR DAY AS WELL. THROUGHOUT OUR STUDY TODAY, WE WILL HIGHLIGHT SOME "OBSERVATIONS" ON THIS THEME.

OBSERVATION #1 - WHEN YOU ARE CALLED BY GOD TO DO SOMETHING (IN GENERAL OR SPECIFICALLY), YOU MAY FACE INSTANCES WHERE COMPROMISING MAY APPEAR TO HELP YOUR PROGRESS, BUT WOULD BE A LACK OF TRUST IN THE LORD. DO NOT COMPROMISE, BUT INSTEAD RECOGNIZE SUCH OFFERS AS TEMPTATIONS AND NOT OPTIONS. STAY FAITHFUL AND DO NOT QUIT.

EZRA 4:4-5 - DISCOURAGEMENT → FEAR → FRUSTRATION

LET'S REMEMBER FROM EZRA 3 THAT THE RETURNING EXILES WERE "TERRIFIED BECAUSE OF THE PEOPLES OF THE LAND" (3:3), YET THEY WENT AHEAD WITH THE BUILDING OF AND WORSHIPPING AT THE LORD'S ALTAR IN JERUSALEM. BUT THOUGH THEY HAD SHOWN FAITH AND COURAGE, THE OUTSIDER THREAT CLEARLY STILL REMAINS.

AND NOTICE, THEIR ATTEMPTS TO DISCOURAGE AND FRUSTRATE DID NOT JUST HAPPEN ONCE, IT HAPPENED FOR SOME TIME:

ESV STUDY BIBLE: "THE REAL ATTITUDE OF THESE RESIDENTS, NOW CALLED THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND, EMERGES. THEY SHOWED THEIR DETERMINED OPPOSITION ALL THE DAYS OF CYRUS (FROM THE TIME THE OPPOSITION BEGAN IN 538 OR 537 B.C.; CYRUS DIED IN 530) EVEN UNTIL THE REIGN OF DARIUS (REIGNED 522—486). THEREFORE, THE OPPOSITION CONTINUED OVER A PERIOD OF ABOUT 20 YEARS, UP TO THE COMPLETION OF THE TEMPLE IN 516 B.C. THE DISCOURAGEMENT APPARENTLY INVOLVED TURNING LOCAL OFFICIALS AGAINST THE PROJECT. EVEN THOUGH THE PROJECT ACTUALLY HAD THE FULL AUTHORITY OF KING CYRUS BEHIND IT, LOCAL ENEMIES WOULD EXPLOIT THE DISTANCE OF JERUSALEM FROM THE IMPERIAL CENTER TO THEIR OWN ADVANTAGE." (NOTE ON EZRA 4:4-5)

WE SHOULD NOTE THAT THERE ARE SOME DATING ISSUES TO THIS ENTIRE CHAPTER. SOME OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHAPTER INDICATES THAT THE WALLS ARE BEING WORKED ON (SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS AFTER THE TEMPLE IS BUILT). WE WILL TRY AND SORT OUT SOME OF THESE DATES AS WE WORK THROUGH EZRA AND NEHEMIAH, BUT IT SEEMS LIKE THE PLACEMENT OF THE DETAILS OF CHAPTER 4 ARE TO INFORM THE READER TO THE "SPIRIT" OF THE REGION - THE TENSION BETWEEN JUDAH AND THEIR ENEMIES - THE TRIALS THAT ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE RETURN AND REBUILDING OF JERUSALEM/TEMPLE. THAT IS THE *POINT* OF THE LETTER, THE DATES AND TIMING ARE THE EXTRA-CURRICULAR DETAILS.

OBSERVATION #2 - IF YOUR ENEMY CANNOT GET YOU TO TAKE A SHORTCUT, HE LIKELY WILL BRING DISCOURAGEMENT AROUND OR IN YOU TO CAUSE YOU TO SLOW DOWN, BECOME AFRAID, AND ULTIMATELY QUIT. SUCH DISCOURAGEMENT CAN BROING DOUBT OF YOURSELF OR IN GOD. THIS IS A BATTLE THAT MUST BE FOUGHT IN PRAYER, HONESTY, AND BY EMBRACING THE TRUTH OF WHAT GOD & HIS WORD SAYS ABOUT YOU AND YOUR SITUATION RATHER THAN BY LOOKING AT YOURSELF OR BELIEVING DEVILISH LIES.

EZRA 4:6-11A - TROUBLE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

THE OTHER INHABITANTS OF THE LAND ARE SO SET ON FRUSTRATING THE PLANS OF THE JEWS TO REBUILD THE TEMPLE THAT THEY EVEN UNITE AND PREPARE A LETTER TO KING ARTAXERXES (THE CURRENT RULER OF PERSIA). IN LONG INTRO AND LIST OF NAMES HIGHLIGHTS THE ALLIANCE OF PEOPLE/NATIONS AGAINST JUDAH. ALSO NOTE THE RESPECTFUL AND HONORING TONE TOWARDS ARTAXERXES.

OBSERVATION #3 - OUR ADVERSARY AND HIS FORCES DO NOT BACK DOWN AT FIRST RESISTANCE. THEY ARE PERSISTENT HOPING THAT THEIR CONTINUAL ATTACK WILL WEAR DOWN THE SPIRIT OF GOD'S PEOPLE. WE SEE THIS IN THEIR LONG TERM FRUSTRATION PROJECT IN V. 4-5 AND WE SEE IT HERE IN THEIR ATTEMPT TO GARNER THE INTERVENTION OF THE KING VIA LETTER. JONATHAN MCREYNOLDS' SONG "CYCLES" TEACHES US THIS POINT. HE SINGS THE FOLLOWING: "SEE THE DEVIL, HE LEARNS FROM YOUR MISTAKES, EVEN IF YOU DON'T." IN OTHER WORDS, WE MUST RECOGNIZE THAT THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE IS AN ONGOING BATTLE, THAT EVEN WHEN THERE ARE VICTORIES IN VARIOUS AREAS, THE EVIL ONE WILL NOT LET UP. WHILE WE WIN IN THE END AND ARE VICTORIOUS NOW THROUGH CHRIST'S STRENGTH, IF WE DON'T RECOGNIZE WE ARE IN THE ONGOING FIGHT, WE WILL BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO ATTACK. IN THIS SPIRITUAL WAR, WE DON'T REST SIMPLY WHEN OUR ENEMY IS DEFEATED, WE REST WHEN HE'S DEAD.

EZRA 4:11B-16 - THE TEXT OF THE LETTER

THESE VERSES GIVE US THE TEXT OF THE LETTER SENT BY THE LEADERS OF THE NEIGHBORING PEOPLE TO THE KING OF PERSIA AT THE TIME (ARTAXERXES). THE LETTER ACCUSES THE JEWS OF JERUSALEM OF PLANNING REBELLION AGAINST PERSIA. THE LEADERS CLAIM TO BE LOYAL TO PERSIA (AS OPPOSED TO THE JEWS) AND THAT'S WHY THEY ARE WRITING THIS LETTER.

THE LEADERS ALSO INCLUDE AN INTERESTING ACCUSATION AGAINST THE JEWS BASED ON THE HISTORY OF THE NATION AS A REBELLIOUS PEOPLE IN THE PAST. IN A WAY, THEY ARE WRITING A BIT OF REVISIONIST HISTORY ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF GOD. INDEED THE NATION OF ISRAEL & JUDAH HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT THAN THE OTHER NATIONS AND GOD HAS DEFENDED THEM (EX: HEZEKIAH V. ASSYRIAN ARMY). SOME OF THE LATER KINGS OF JUDAH REVOLTED AGAINST ASSYRIA AND BABYLON, BUT IN THOSE INSTANCES THEY WERE NOT LED BY THE LORD. NEVERTHELESS, THE LETTER IMPLIES THAT IF JERUSALEM IS REBUILT, IT WILL ONLY CAUSE TROUBLE FOR PERSIA.

OBSERVATION #4 - THE ENEMY WILL TRY AND BRING UP YOUR PAST (GOOD OR BAD) AS A REASON YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE VICTORY IN THE PRESENT. IN THIS CASE THE FACTS ARE TWISTED BUT THE PRINCIPLE IS TRUE. THE ENEMY WILL REMIND YOU OR OTHERS OF HOW YOU DIDN'T FOLLOW THROUGH IN THE PAST, HOW YOU HAVE SINNED, HOW YOU HAVE FAILED, WHAT YOUR PARENTS DID/DIDN'T DO ETC ETC ETC., ALL WITH THE PURPOSE OF STOPPING YOU FROM FOLLOWING THROUGH WITH WHAT GOD HAS CALLED YOU TO DO. WE COMBAT THIS WITH REMEMBERING THE MERCY AND GRACE OF GOD, HIS FORGIVENESS AND A RENEWED TRUST IN HIS SPIRITUAL POWER TO OVERCOME, AND NOT OUR OWN STRENGTH. WHEN THE ENEMY WHISPERS THAT YOU WILL FAIL, ANSWER BACK WITH "I KNOW /WILL FAIL, BUT I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST WHO STRENGTHENS ME!"

EZRA 4:17-22 - THE KING'S RESPONSE

THE LETTER FROM "THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND" WORKED. THE PERSIAN OFFICIAL REPLIES THAT THE WORK MUST STOP ON JERUSALEM BECAUSE ANY SORT OF TROUBLE OR REBELLION WILL NOT BE TOLERATED. HE SAYS:

EZRA 4:19, 22 (NLT) - "A DECREE HAS BEEN ISSUED BY ME, AND A SEARCH HAS BEEN MADE AND IT HAS BEEN DISCOVERED THAT THAT CITY HAS RISEN UP AGAINST THE KINGS IN PAST DAYS, THAT REBELLION AND REVOLT HAVE BEEN PERPETRATED IN IT...22 ...FOR WE MUST NOT PERMIT THE SITUATION TO HARM THE KING'S INTERESTS."

HERE WE HAVE THE PEOPLE OF GOD LEGALLY REBUILDING THE TEMPLE - BUT BECAUSE SOME CRAFTY MEN APPEAL TO A KING NOT CAUGHT UP WITH HIS HISTORY - THEIR WORK MUST STOP. WHAT KING ARTAXERXES DID NOT KNOW WAS THAT KING CYRUS HAD SAID THIS WORK SHOULD GO ON. IT WILL NOT BE UNTIL ANOTHER KING (DARIUS IN CHAPTER 5) LEARNS THE TRUTH THAT THINGS WILL BE SORTED OUT.

OBSERVATION #5 - YOUR ENEMY WILL TRY AND COVER UP THE FACT THAT GOD'S TRUE AND ENDURING WORD SUPERSEDES ALL OTHER WORDS, THOUGHTS OR NARRATIVES. THE SPIRITUAL WARFARE PRINCIPLE FOR US TO LEARN IS THAT WE MUST NOT ACCEPT THE DEVIL'S VERSION OF THE FACTS AS OUR OWN. THIS IS WHAT TRIPPED UP EVE IN THE GARDEN. SHE BELIEVED THE TWIST THAT THE DEVIL PUT ON GOD'S WORDS RATHER THAN WHAT GOD HAD SPOKEN. WE SEE A SIMILAR THING HERE. ARTAXERXES BELIEVES THE WORD OF THE PEOPLE, TWISTING THE TRUTH, RATHER THAN THE WRITTEN AND DECREED WORD MADE BY CYRUS YEARS BEFORE. THE ENEMY TRIES TO SPIN FALSE STORIES WHICH SEEM "CLOSE" TO THE TRUTH...BUT CLOSE TO THE TRUTH ISN'T THE TRUTH. DON'T TAKE THE BAIT. THE ENEMY WILL STRAIGHT UP LIE ABOUT THINGS GOD HAS SAID IN GENERAL OR SPECIFICALLY ABOUT YOU. OTHERS MIGHT BELIEVE THESE LIES...BUT WILL YOU?

EZRA 4:23-24 - THE WORK STOPS

SURE ENOUGH THE EFFORTS OF THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND ACHIEVE THEIR DESIRED RESULT - THE TEMPLE WORK IS HALTED. HOW TWISTED THIS ALL IS! IT SEEMS THAT THESE ENEMIES ARE DRIVEN BY THE GOAL TO SEE THE TEMPLE NOT BUILT. THEY APPEAR TO HAVE LITTLE TO GAIN FROM THIS, OTHER THAN THE PLEASURE OF SEEING THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH DEFEATED.

SCHOLARS CONCLUDE THAT THE WORK STOPPAGE LASTED IN TOTAL FOR ABOUT 15 YEARS. 15 YEARS. WOW. THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SENT BACK FROM EXILE WITH THE EXPRESS PURPOSE OF REBUILDING THE TEMPLE AND THEIR LIVES AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD ARE NOW IN A STANDSTILL. AS WE CLOSE CHAPTER 4, WE ARE LEFT IN "PAUSE" MODE. THE WORK STOPS, BUT THE JUDEAN PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO DECIDE WHAT THEY DO NEXT. WILL THEY QUIT, WILL THEY COMPROMISE, OR WILL THEY PRESS ON? THE ANSWER AWAITS US AS WE READ ON...

OBSERVATION #6 - MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT - THE END GOAL OF OUR ADVERSARY AND THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE WE ARE IN IS THIS - STOP US FROM LIVING FOR THE LORD. THAT STOPPAGE MIGHT LOOK LIKE A STARTING OF SOMETHING OTHER THAN LIVING FOR THE LORD (EX: SINNING, LIVING FOR SELF) OR IT MAY BE A SLOW DOWN TO AN EVENTUAL NEGLIGENCE OF THE LIFE GOD HAS CALLED US TO LIVE. WE ARE STILL LIVING LIFE, GOING TO WORK, FEEDING OUR FAMILIES, INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE, BUT WE ARE NOT DRIVEN BY THE MISSION AND PURPOSE OF OUR LIVES - TO LIVE FOR HIS GLORY. THE DEVIL MIGHT NOT KILL YOU, BUT HE MIGHT GET YOU TO QUIT. THE DEVIL MIGHT NOT TEMPT YOU TO TELL LIES, BUT HE MIGHT GET YOU TO NOT SPEAK TRUTH. THE DEVIL MIGHT NOT GET YOU TO FORSAKE CHRIST, BUT HE MIGHT WORK TO GET YOU TO LIVE FOR JESUS & SOMETHING/SOMEONE ELSE. RECOGNIZING THE END GOAL OF OUR OPPOSITION IN THIS LIFE WILL HELP US TO BE ON GUARD AGAINST GETTING CAUGHT IN HIS TRAPS.

REMEMBER THE WORDS OF OUR CAPTAIN IN LIGHT OF OUR ENEMY:

JOHN 10:10 - "THE THIEF COMES ONLY TO STEAL AND KILL AND DESTROY; I CAME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE, AND HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY.

BE WISE AND WATCHFUL. DON'T LET HIM STEAL YOUR TIME, YOUR LIFE, YOUR THOUGHTS, YOUR HEART. DON'T LET HIM KILL YOUR RELATIONSHIPS, YOUR DRIVE, OR YOUR PASSION. DON'T LET HIM DESTROY YOUR VISION, YOUR LISTENING EAR OR CRIPPLE YOUR HANDS OR FEET. IT HAS BEEN SAID OF THE ADVERSARY THAT "THE SECRET TO HIS SUCCESS IS THE SECRECY OF HIS MOVES..." LEARN THESE PRINCIPLES OF THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE AND THE WAY TO FIGHT AGAINST THE EVIL ONE.

FIGHT TO WIN AND WIN BECAUSE YOU FOUGHT.