

Ezra 4:1-5 (1)

If we were reading a children's fiction story, the Book of Ezra might have finished at the end of chapter 3: "And they built the temple quickly and they all lived happily ever after!" Sadly, this was not the case.

The story that now unfolds is one of retreat rather than progress.

Summary

Ezra 4:1-5 shows that opposition was the reason why the work on building the temple ground to a halt.

1. Important Recurring Theme

Opposition and discouragement is an important recurring theme throughout redemptive history for the people of God. We have a particular example of it here in **Ezra 4**. The chapter begins with the discouragement that came after the offer of assistance from the Samaritans was declined.

Opposition is a constant theme from this point onward, right through until the end of the book of Ezra and into the book of Nehemiah.

This tells us that the kingdom of God is built within enemy-occupied territory (**Matt. 16:18**).

In Ezra 4, Satan employs Samaritans (those resettled in the northern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria) as his instruments of opposition.

Satan seeks to destroy whatever is good, and his aim here as elsewhere is to thwart God's plan, rob the Lord of glory, and portray himself as king.

Christians have often been enamored of Satan's grand deception and far too easily duped into believing that his claims are true.

The Samaritans are Satan's unwitting instruments in this spiritual conflict.

Jesus warned that unbelievers are the devil's children (**John 8:44**), and he has great skill in manipulating individuals (E.g. Eve: 1 Tim. 2:14, Judas: John 13:27, and Elymas the magician: Acts 13:10). We ignore this fact at our peril.

It is to the great credit of Zerubbabel and Jeshua that they viewed the situation from the beginning as a work of enemies ("adversaries," **Ezra 4:1**) and were alert to the possible consequences if they were tempted to cooperate.

We should be grateful for such discerning leadership when it manifests itself and pray that the Lord would supply it when it does not.

2. Enemy Occupied Territory vv. 1-2; 4

News of the temple rebuilding project reached those who dwelt farther afield, and as the work begins, a delegation arrived in the city, identified as "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" (**Ezra 4:1**) and "the people of the land" (**Ezra 4:4; cf. 3:3**). They are also identified as those who were forcibly resettled in the land during the reign of the

Assyrian king Esarhaddon (4:2). These delegates were a people of mixed racial and religious background who had no claim to being part of the people of God.

The Old Testament church had a unique identity, being partly civil and partly ecclesiastical. Under the new covenant, the civil barriers have been removed (**Eph. 2:14**). There remains, however, a division between those in Christ and those of the world. Unbelievers are to be evangelized, loved, and cared for, but they cannot be embraced within the church and enjoy its privileges and comforts.

To what extent may the church cooperate with unbelievers?

In the civil sphere, Christians cooperate with unbelievers on issues common to the civil realm but in the church, it is entirely different. “To balk at the idea of intolerance to syncretism within the church is to doom the church to oblivion.”

3. Rightly Declined Offer vv. 2-3

The offer, “Let us build with you” (**Ezra 4:2**), might have seemed timely and generous. The sooner the temple was built, the sooner the people of God could return to their homes and livelihoods. Construction is not a religious matter. The outright rejection of the offer appears shocking and shortsighted (**Ezra 4:3**). Why did the exiles refuse this help? It is likely, there were some political motivations behind the offer of help. For Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the idolatrous Gentiles were religiously compromised and so the ecumenical offer of cooperation was flatly refused. Many conclude from this that the Jews were intolerant and bigoted and the “people of the land” cordial and ecumenical.

Today it is common to hear calls for the abandonment of the uniqueness of Christianity because of the belief in religious pluralism.

Pluralism is the view that there are many ways to God and that all of them are equally valid. Once you adopt the view that there is more than one way to God, pluralism outlaws all arguments in favor of “one way to God” as being out of court.

These delegates of Samaria did not share the same convictions as the returned exiles, nor did they submit themselves to the authority of Scripture alone as the foundation of all that is true. Their claim to worship the same God was deemed a false one, and so cooperation with them in a religious enterprise such as building the temple would have been a fatal mistake.

The author of the book of Ezra is eager for us to learn that danger lurks here in the guise of a genuine offer of help. These are wolves in sheep’s clothing, plotting mischief and mayhem unless forthrightly opposed. Behind this lay the archenemy himself, Satan. His ill will toward God, and all things that pertain to God’s kingdom, is evident, and the Jews will have no truck with a cooperative venture destined to destroy the kingdom rather than build it. These delegates are “enemies of the cross of Christ” (**Phil. 3:18**), to be resisted with unrelenting zeal.