

EZRA 4

A LETTER TO THE KING OF PERSIA

This chapter gives us a glimpse of the old enmity that was put between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:14-15). God's Temple cannot be built without causing Satan to rage, and the gates of hell to fight against it. That is why the Gospel-Kingdom has been – and still is – being set up with much struggling. In this respect, the glory of this second Temple was indeed greater than the glory of Solomon's; it was a better picture of Christ's Church – for Solomon built his Temple in a time of peace (1 Kings 5:4), but this second Temple was built in the midst of great opposition. But in spite of all difficulties, the power and goodness of God were greatly glorified; and the people of God were encouraged to trust in Him.

The adversaries that the Jews faced during this time were the Samaritans – the remnants of the ten tribes of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the heathen foreigners who had joined themselves with them and mingled their pagan religions with a pretended worship of God (2 Kings 17:33). When these people heard that the Temple was being rebuilt, they immediately tried to oppose it; and since they could not do it forcibly, they tried all the ways they could find to do it effectually. They offered their services to build the Temple with the Israelites – but only so that they might get an opportunity to hinder the work, while they pretended to help it. When this plot failed, the enemies did what they could to divert the Jews from the work, and discourage them in it. They also hired counselors against them, who pretended to advise them for the best; but they actually tried to dissuade them from proceeding, in order to frustrate their plans. We must never wonder at the restlessness of our spiritual foes in their attempts against the establishment of Christ's Church! The evil master whose work they are doing is unwearied in doing mischief throughout the earth.

Unfortunately, King Cyrus of Persia did not live long after his conquest of Babylon and his decree that gave permission for the Temple to be rebuilt. His successor was his son Cambyses (also called Ahasuerus in verse 6). To this man, the Samaritans wrote a letter, asking for an order to stop the building of the Temple. But Cambyses never bothered to reply to this letter, nor did he live long anyway. While he was busily engaged in fighting foreign wars, a conspiracy involving a usurper was hatched back in his homeland. Cambyses started racing home to deal with this problem, but he died along the way. So the usurper, whose name was Pseudo-Smerdis (also called Artaxerxes in verse 7), remained on the throne; and the Samaritans wrote another letter to him. This letter has

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ *The Jews' enemies oppose and hinder the building of the Temple – verses 1-5*
- ❖ *The enemies write to the king of Persia, misrepresenting their undertaking – verses 6-16*
- ❖ *They obtain an order for the Jews to stop building the Temple – verses 17-24*

been preserved for us to read in verses 7-16 of this chapter, and it is full of lies. The Samaritans represented themselves therein as being very loyal to the government, and greatly concerned for its honor and interest; and they falsely misrepresented the Jews as being disloyal and dangerous – even though Daniel himself (who was a Jew) had recently shown himself so faithful to his Persian prince, that even his worst enemies could find no fault in his life and conduct (Dan. 6:4). But we must remember that even Christ Himself was falsely accused of perverting the nation and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, and so we must not think it strange if the same game is still played against His people today.

The information that the Jews' enemies gave to the Persian king concerning what was transpiring at Jerusalem was grossly false. The Samaritans were very careful to inform the king that they had already built up the walls of the city, but this was far from being the case. They had only begun to build *the Temple*, which Cyrus had commanded them to do; but as for the city walls, there was nothing done at all toward the repair of them. Indeed, many years later, in the time of Nehemiah, they were still in ruins (Neh. 1:3).

King Pseudo-Smerdis (or Artaxerxes) of Persia allowed himself to be deceived by the Samaritans' fraud and falsehood. He took no care to examine the allegations of their petition, concerning what the Jews were doing; he took it for granted that the charges were true. He consulted the records concerning Jerusalem, and he claimed that he found that it had indeed rebelled against the king of Babylon. Consequently, he appointed the Samaritans to stop the building of the city immediately, until further orders were given about it. Neither they in their letter, nor he in his order, made any mention of the building of the Temple; because both they and he knew that Cyrus had commanded them to rebuild it.

The Jews' enemies made speedy use of these orders that were so fraudulently obtained. Upon receiving them, they hurried to Jerusalem and served the Jewish builders with the king's prohibition, which they produced as their warrant to make them cease by force and power. And just as they had obtained this order by misinformation, they also falsely construed it to be referring to the Temple – even though it only prevented the rebuilding of the city walls. So the work of the house of God ceased for a time, through the power and insolence of its enemies, and through the coldness and indifference of its friends – who apparently did not do very much to withstand this unjust order, or appeal to the Persian king concerning it. Indeed, nothing further was done on this project until the second year of King Darius, in 520 BC.

O God, we thank You that the apparent triumphs of our spiritual enemies are short-lived; for You, Lord Jesus, have already won the ultimate victory over them! Amen.

