

The Adversaries Attack

Text: Ezra 4:1-5

Introduction:

1. Up until this point, the work has gone on unhindered. In the last chapter, the altar of worship and the foundation was established. There was great joy and celebration at the laying of the foundation. Everything was going so well. The construction work was now underway. Then we encounter the word 'now' in 4:1, introducing an abrupt intrusion upon this happy scene. The enemy will not stay neutral to the work of God forever!
2. This chapter is full of helpful instruction on the character of the enemy we face. Behind the human instruments we detect the sinister movements of the Devil, seeking to bring God's work to an end.
3. The opposition came from the Samaritan peoples. Bible commentator M.K. Hall explains, "The origin of these "adversaries" went back to the time when, because of their idolatry, the Lord allowed the king of Assyria to capture Israel, often known as Samaria, and carry the people away into Assyria in the period 740-722 BC (2 Kings 17:6). Subsequently Esarhaddon, a later king of Assyria, colonised the cities of Samaria with people from Assyria and Babylonia (2 Kings 17:24). The "adversaries" are their descendants, known as Samaritans. Samaria was some forty miles (64 kilometres) from Jerusalem."
4. We will note four lessons about the enemy's attack in the chapter. We will cover the first two in this message and the final two in the next message.
 - The Stimulation of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 1-2a)
 - The Strategies of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 2b-5)
 - The Slander of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 6-16)
 - The Success of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 17-24)

I. THE STIMULATION OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (Vs. 1-2A)

What was it that aroused the enemy's opposition? The enemy was aroused by:

A. The Revival of the Remnant

- a. Let's remember the context. This group of people has been stirred up by the Spirit of God (Ez. 1:5) and delivered out of captivity.
- b. So long as a believer stays captive in the world (Babylon) in a place of spiritual defeat, the devil isn't too worried about him but let a believer respond to the stirring of the Spirit and begin to experience revival and all of a sudden, the devil gets interested.
- c. While you are in bondage to the world and the flesh, you are little threat to the devil's kingdom but if you get back to freedom and liberty in Christ and become concerned about God's ways

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and God's work, then you become a direct threat to Satan's kingdom.

B. The Return of the Remnant

The revival in the hearts in the remnant lead to the return of the remnant. They had returned to:

1. The land.
2. The altar.
3. The foundation.
4. The truth. This was a back to the Bible movement!

C. The Rebuilding of the Remnant (Vs. 1-2a)

1. Note the 'when' (Vs. 1) and 'then' (Vs. 2a). No doubt the enemy was unsettled by the presence of the revived, returned remnant in the land but it wasn't until the rebuilding work commenced in earnest that the enemy was moved to action. In this section the thought of building is mentioned five times (Vs. 1, 2, 3 (twice), 4). This suggests that they began to build on the foundation which had been laid (3:10).
2. The house of God constituted a direct threat to the enemy. So long as the temple lay in ruins, the enemy wasn't too worried, even though singing and worshipping was going on there. But a rebuilt house was too much for the enemy and he sprang into action. The house of God represented the place of gathering and the place of testimony.
3. The New Testament house of God is not a physical building but the assembly of God's people, the local church (1 Tim. 3:15, Eph. 2:19-22). You may experience a measure of personal revival but so long as you forsake the assembly life of God's house, the devil won't be too worried about you but let a revived remnant come together with the resolve to work and witness together for the Lord and watch how the fury of hell is stirred up.

II. THE STRATEGIES OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (VS. 2B-5)

Ephesians uses the word 'wiles' to describe the tactics of the devil. The word 'wiles' comes from the Greek word 'methodeia' from which we derive our English word method. It means "procedure, process, method, strategy or scheme" (Hoehner). The English word 'wiles' expresses the meaning well as it means "A trick or stratagem practiced for ensnaring or deception; a sly insidious artifice." (Webster) They are "lying strategies". The Apostle uses the word 'devices' in 2 Cor. 2:11 meaning "thoughts, schemes". The enemy's strategies can be grouped under two main headings. He comes as:

A. A Serpent to Deceive (Vs. 2-3)

The enemy's first approach is subtle.

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1. The Invitation of Ecumenism (Vs. 2)
 - a. The offer is one of friendship and collaboration and on the surface sounded attractive. This would mean greater numbers, more resources and more labourers, or so it seemed. H.L. Rossier wisely wrote, “Let us beware of the favours of the world even more than of its threats.”
 - b. Two false claims are made in the attempt to bolster their ecumenical invitation.
 - i. We also seek God as you do.
 - ii. We also sacrifice to God.
 - c. These claims were clearly false for the following two reasons:
 - i. The Holy Spirit clearly identifies them as the “adversaries” of Judah and Benjamin in verse 1.
 - ii. The Word of God reveals that in reality the Samaritan peoples were idolaters who mixed the worship of God with the worship of idols. Read 2 Kings. 17:24-41 (particularly Vs. 32-41).
2. The Rejection of Ecumenism (Vs. 3)
 - a. The Identity of those who Refused (Vs. 3a)
 - i. It was the leaders of the remnant who refused this invitation. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were the primary overseers supported by the chief of the fathers. These men were faithful shepherds and overseers of God’s people who refused to allow the wolves to get among the sheep.
 - ii. It reminds us of the high responsibility upon those who hold the New Testament office of Pastor, Bishop (Shepherd-Overseer) and those who hold the office of Deacon in support of the pastoral office. If the leaders of God’s people won’t take a clear stand against the attempts of the enemy to infiltrate the flock, the sheep will be left in a very dangerous place and most won’t survive the onslaught.
 - b. The Spirituality of those who Refused (Vs. 3b)

The godliness of these men is highlighted in their:

 - i. Discernment. These men were not fooled by the deceitful approach of the enemy.
 - ii. Directness. These men were clear and bold in their stand. There was no fleshly railing against the enemy but they were straightforward and unequivocal in their refusal of the invitation. In short, these men knew how to say “no”! Be thankful if you have godly leaders prepared to use the word “no”.

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- iii. Separation. Affirming the separation of the remnant was the response of these men to the invitation – “but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD”.
- iv. Unity. Note the word ‘together’. They were united in their stand. The unity we need is not a false unity with the enemy but a true unity against the enemy as God’s people.
- v. Determined. They declared their resolve to build for the Lord in accordance with the decree of king Cyrus.

B. A Lion to Devour (Vs. 4-5)

We have another ‘then’ in verse 4 introducing the response of the adversary to the rejection of their offer. The deception having failed, the enemy quickly removes the mask and reveals his true colors. If deception will not work, he will unleash the roars of intimidation in the hopes of striking fear into the saints so that they will give up the work. The enemy moves from an undercover operation to an all-out frontal assault on the people of God and the work of God.

1. He Weakened their Hands (Vs. 4a). Keil and Delitzsch state that “To weaken the hands of any one, means to deprive him of strength and courage for action”. Hall adds, “The word means to weaken or enfeeble to the point where those so weakened become discouraged and disheartened.” Exactly how the enemy did this is not stated but in may well have involved mockery as it did in the case of Nehemiah.
2. He Troubled their Building (Vs. 4b). This word may give us clue as to what the enemy was doing as the word ‘troubled’ means “to trouble by means of a sudden calamity, and so to terrify. It suggests some kind of actual interference with the building work” (M.K. Hall). No doubt the enemy threatened and attempted attacks against the work.
3. He Frustrated their Purpose (Vs. 5). The word ‘frustrated has the sense of “to break, defeat.” They hindered the work by hiring counselors against them. This probably involved some sort of legal representation to the king’s court. The devil loves to take the position of prosecuting attorney against God’s people. The determination of the adversaries is seen in their willingness to pay money to try and stop God’s work and also their persistence in attacking God’s people from the reign of Cyrus to Darius.
4. All of the above reminds us of the principal brought out in the Book of Nehemiah of the sword and the trowel. God’s people must be both workers and warriors, both builders and soldiers. Nehemiah 4:17 “They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, **every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other *hand* held a weapon.**”

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To be continued...

Conclusion: Which side of the conflict are you on? Are you aiding the work of the slander or being a builder/soldier in the service of God?