

Opportunity Equals Opposition

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part V

Ezra 4

Introduction

For several weeks, I have been meeting on Wednesday morning with two men who recently accepted Christ as their personal Savior. We meet at Chick-fil-A. It is fitting to meet at a place that is closed on Sunday, because the founder and owner is a believer. There, in a back corner, we read, pray, and talk about the Christian life. One of these men is a software guru, and the other guy is a CPA. While their professions are very different, they have discovered one thing they have in common – they both ride motorcycles. And, they both have said it is their goal to get me on one of them. Apparently they do not know my wife. One of them brought an article last week, as a way to further motivate my thinking about motorcycles.

This was actually written by a motorcycle driving pastor from New Jersey,

The Christian life is an adventure and challenge filled journey; it is very much like riding a motorcycle.

It gets deeper.

A life of Christian faith has a lot in common with the experience of riding a motorcycle. They're both invigorating, full of surprises and people sometimes look at you kinda funny for doing it. You go against the grain; there are risks; and you feel alive. You have to maintain your machine and bring the right equipment. Oh, and just like riding a motorcycle, you can get some bugs in your teeth being a Christian. There are also safer

places to be! It is a challenge, adventure and a wonderful journey.

It is so clear now – God wants me to buy a Harley! Well, maybe not.

I do think, however, that some of these phrases about the Christian life are great: "... people look at you kinda funny for living it . . . there are surprises . . . you go against the grain . . . and sometimes you get bugs in your teeth . . . and there are safer places to be . . .".

Overview

So far, our study in Ezra has recorded for us a safe journey for the Israelite. So far, it has been a smooth ride.

They were captives in the land of foreign kings. For seventy years they had been paying the consequences of their disobedience to God. But, Ezra opens his book with the record of a miracle – God has turned the heart of King Cyrus, who gives a proclamation that the people of Israel can return to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding their temple and their beloved city. So, fifty thousand people sign on in faith and dedicate themselves to restore their nation's worship system for the glory of God.

Everything is working out beautifully! In chapter 3, they rebuild the altar and resume sacrifices, they begin the restoration process of the temple, which had been destroyed, and they even pour the foundation. A celebration erupts as they shout, "Hallelujah," to God, so loudly that their sound was heard far away.

Evidently, the sound of their praising God reaches the ears of their enemies. The children of Israel are about to experience bugs in their teeth. The smooth ride is about to end.

The Threat of Ungodly Alliances

Let us look at what happened next, in chapter 4, verses 1 and 2.

Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the Lord God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

This sounds great does it not? Volunteer help just showed up! And these people worship God too! That is what you and I would initially think, if Ezra had not let us know, with the very first verse, that they were not friends. He is letting us know, at the very beginning, that these people are not even nice. In fact, they are enemies of God.

Continue to verse 3.

But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us."

Infiltration!

You need to understand that this offer to help was nothing less than the subtle threat of infiltration! And, it would have required an ungodly alliance.

But, wait a second, these Samaritans said, in verse 2,

... we . . . seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him . . .

Let me read the real story of what they had been doing, in II Kings, chapter 17, verses 27 through 33.

Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, "Take there one of the priests whom you carried away into exile, and let him go and live there; and let him teach them the custom of the god of the land." So one of the priests whom they had carried away into

exile from Samaria came and lived at Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the Lord. But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the houses of the high places which the people of Samaria had made, every nation in their cities in which they lived. And the men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, and the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech the gods of Sepharvaim. They also feared the Lord and appointed from among themselves priests of the high places, who acted for them in the houses of the high places. They feared the Lord and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile.

Would you like a good description of America? There it is!

They feared the Lord and served their own gods . . .

They paid lip service to God. They showed some level of respect. They printed on their currency, "In God we Trust." They went to war and then talked of sending their prayers to a God they did not want mentioned any other time. Our nation resembles the Samaritans more than it does the Israelites.

And what of the modern church? Has it been infiltrated with a philosophy of life other than radical commitment to Jesus Christ?

Symptoms of a Modern Day Problem?!

I will give a short list that describes symptoms of infiltration. Try them on for size.

Anonymity is . . .

1. One symptom is that anonymity is acceptable.

In other words, "Come to church and we'll leave you alone. Just clock in with us, don't change, grow, repent, or reform. We just want to add you to our membership."

The motto of this infiltrated church is, "If you'll attend, we won't offend."

Worship is . . .

2. A second symptom is that worship is a one day a week event.

It is not a practice, a discipline, a passion, or a lifestyle, it is one hour a week for God and the remaining one hundred sixty-seven hours for me.

The church is . . .

3. Another symptom is that the church is a building.

The truth is, the church building is a base of operation – the church happens to be you! Tomorrow, the church will be in a thousand different places. One of the problems I have with church signs is that they imply that the geographical location is the church. It is not. It just happens to gather there.

Somebody else . . .

4. A fourth symptom of infiltration is that somebody else can serve.

Tipping on Sunday can . . .

5. Another is that tipping on Sunday can replace stewardship.

Systematic, prayerful investment is replaced by a casual tip.

Edification focuses on my needs rather than . . .

6. A sixth symptom is that edification focuses on my needs rather than God's commands.

For the average Christian, the word “edification” refers to how he feels. If he feels good after a service, he says, “I was really edified.”

Ladies and gentlemen, edification has nothing to do with how you feel; it has everything to do with how you live. In fact, an edifying service may make you feel absolutely miserable – overwhelmed by your sinfulness to the point of repentance. Edification takes place when we conform our will to God's.

Think about the music we sing. We sing some profound lyrics that demand total sellout to God – complete, radical commitment to Jesus Christ. Do we hear what we sing?

President Franklin Roosevelt was very weary of the mindless small talk at White House receptions. Wondering if anyone was engaging in any real conversation, he conducted an experiment. At the next White House gathering, as he shook hands with the dignitaries and guests who were passing him in

the reception line, he quietly said to each person, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.”

The people would smile back and say things like, “You're doing a great job,” or even, “How lovely!”

Only one person really heard him – a visiting foreign diplomat who responded back quietly, “I'm sure she had it coming.”

This morning, are we really listening? Will it make any difference??

Experience matters more than . . .

7. One more symptom of infiltration is that experience matters more than theology.

In other words, the Bible is a nice guideline, but do not take it so seriously. Whatever you do, whatever you believe, whatever you have experienced is right for you.

You can almost hear the Samaritans in Ezra, chapter 4, verse 2b, saying, “Listen, just loosen up, we'll help you build. What do you mean, you have nothing in common with us? We've added Jehovah to our list of gods. Don't be so intolerant of our religion. It works for us!”

Zerubbabel and the other leaders knew the truth – the one and only true and living God demanded exclusive worship. He was not to be added to anyone's list of gods, He was the list.

Zerubbabel and the others knew that this was actually a battle over doctrine. God had already said to them,

You shall have no other gods before Me.

That was the command of God. Period.

Perhaps you have heard about an anonymous financier who rented billboard space in Florida. The billboards had a black background with white lettering that displayed a short message and, underneath, was the name God. I read several of them in an article. The one that struck me, in light of this passage, was one that said, “What part of ‘Thou Shalt Not’ do you not understand?”

Those who claim to worship God can worship only God.

In this battle of theology, the Israelites won. They thought critically, and they would not compromise and create an ungodly alliance.

The Israelites avoided disaster, because they saw through the temptation of an ungodly compromise. If only the church today would learn that we also, are

not to attempt to do the work of God with the help of people who do not know God.

Listen to Eugene Peterson's powerfully worded paraphrase of the New Testament text from I Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 14 to 15.

Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil?

Be careful. Be discerning.

The Threat of Unjust Accusations

Now notice what the enemies do next, in verses 4 and 5.

Intimidation!

Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

In other words, the building stopped. It stopped for about fifteen years.

Zerubbabel and the leaders were successful against the threat of infiltration, but they were intimidated and gave up under the constant barrage of unjust accusations. Let me put it another way, they could handle the doctrinal issues with victory, but they could not handle the emotional issues with victory.

Have you discovered that the enemy usually attacks along those lines?

For some, impure doctrine is their downfall. They do not know the scripture – they are tossed about by every wind of doctrine; they are vulnerable to false teachers and religious fads; they never grow, are always needy, and are not able to think critically, doctrinally, or theologically.

For others, doctrine is solid, but their emotions become their downfall. Unable to stand the pain of ridicule, rejection, discouragement, isolation, trial, and disappointment, they curl up and keep their faith a secret.

By the way, Nehemiah was built that way as well. He, without any thought or trouble, withstood the temptations of compromise and ungodly alliances. He was strong doctrinally, yet when he was personally accused of having wrong motives, he

went to his knees in prayer and begged God for strength to carry on.

Verses 6 through 23 are not in chronological order. Ezra is summarizing decades of disappointment. He summarizes fifteen years of a defeated nation, a nation disabled by discouragement! It is one of Satan's most powerful tools.

Notice verse 6,

Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

In this verse, he does not give us details, he simply says a letter was written accusing the Jews of unjust things. Ahasuerus was, by the way, the king who married Esther.

Another illustration is in verse 7,

And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues, wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic.

Now Ezra will give us the contents of this particular letter, perhaps because it summarized all of the other letters that had been written earlier. Look at verses 11 through 12.

This is the copy of the letter which they sent to him: "To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River, and now let it be known to the king, that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations."

Four Reasons the Jews Should Be Stopped:

In this letter, they are going to imply four reasons why the king needs to put a stop to the building project of Jerusalem.

The Jews are a . . .

1. The first reason we just read – Jerusalem is a bad city filled with a rebellious people.

The king will lose . . .

Continue to verse 13,

"Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they

will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings.”

2. Here is the second reason to stop the building – “This city will not pay taxes to you, Oh King. You’re about to lose money!”

The king will lose . . .

Verse 14,

“Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king’s dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king,”

3. Now the third reason to stop the building – “You, Oh King, are about to lose face, lose honor, in the midst of the nations.”

The king will lose . . .

Verses 15 and 16,

“so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And you will discover in the record books, and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past days; therefore that city was laid waste. We inform the king that, if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River.”

4. This is reason number four – “You will lose power; you will not control anything beyond the River Euphrates.”

What do you think any king would say after reading that he is about to lose money, honor and power? “No problem. Taxes are too high anyway. And I’m in the mood to give away some property to a good cause. It’s time I gave something back to the people!”

Not a chance! Kings reserve saying those things for an election year. Especially a king, as we read in verse 7, who has the word “tax” in the middle of his name. That is just a coincidence, I am sure!

Well, Artaxerxes searches the archives for validation and then, issues a decree that the project stop! Verse 24 summarizes this,

Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The king ordered the work to cease. In fact, it is likely that the Persians came and tore down the work the Jews had already completed. Then, when Nehemiah receives the report from his brothers, they were actually describing what the Persians had done to the walls.

It was going so well, then, suddenly, it all went so bad.

Application: B.C. Truths That Continue Today

What can we learn from Zerubbabel’s excitement and then discouragement?

Advancement attracts . . .

1. First, we can learn that advancement attracts attention.

You move an inch in your spiritual walk and someone will take note, if not the underworld, “Hey, that believer just made a commitment – pull out the ammunition.”

Opposition should be . . .

2. Secondly, we can learn that opposition should be our expectation!

Paul wrote to his young son in the faith these words, in II Timothy, chapter 3, verse 12,

And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

In other words, anyone who makes a commitment to live a godly life might as well paint a bulls-eye on his or her face. What I love about this verse is that it does not say, “All who live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,” but, “All who desire to live godly . . .”. If you just want to live for Christ, you get into trouble.

Take it from these believers who experienced this thousands of years ago. They were harassed, threatened, and falsely accused! And, honestly, it worked! Progress ceased.

Opposition is to be expected!

Failure is guaranteed . . .

3. Thirdly, we can learn that failure is guaranteed without God.

What would happen fifteen years later that would cause the building process to begin? What would

encourage the discouraged, defeated, and disabled Zerubbabel to pick up his tools again?

Among a number of things, it would be the preaching of a prophet named Zechariah.

Zechariah's message, that is rarely viewed from the historical context that we have just studied, is in Zechariah, chapter 4, verse 6, and says,

. . . This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel saying, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the Lord of hosts.

What a gracious God. "Zechariah, go tell poor discouraged Zerubbabel, 'It isn't by your might, or your power, or your technique, or your finesse, or your talent.' Tell him, and all the other discouraged believers, 'Anything ever built for the kingdom of God is never built by the power of man, but is built by My Spirit, says the Lord.'"

Hudson Taylor, the pioneer missionary to China, described the successful Christian life as,

Not a striving to have faith – but a looking off to the One who is faithful.

Paul put it this way, in II Timothy, chapter 2, verse 13,

If we are faithless, He remains faithful . . .

And, in I Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 24,

Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

So, when you have been brought to a standstill, remember to still stand. Even if it means you get a few bugs in your teeth, and you realize, standing for Christ, that there are safer places to be – you still stand. And remember, you live and grow and advance and build,

. . . "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the Lord of hosts.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/18/1999 by Stephen Davey.

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