

Trouble

Ezra 4:1-24

Up to this point in our study of Ezra, everything has gone along very well. Cyrus, King of Persia, proclaimed freedom for the people of Israel to return to their own land. And he sent them on their way with plenty of provisions. All the valuables carried off with the people by Nebuchadnezzar were returned. And the people went. Large numbers of them. Including the priests. And the temple singers and gatekeepers. And the people of God again gathered for the worship of God. They offered the prescribed sacrifices, they celebrated the feast of tabernacles, and they began to build the foundation of the temple. And with the foundation in place, the temple worship was reestablished. All that by the second month of the second year of their coming to the house of God in Jerusalem, according to Ezra 3:8.

And then something very predictable happened. Trouble! Opposition arose to the building of the temple. And the opposition came from a rather predictable source. It's the same source of opposition to the church of God and to the people of God common today, as it has been throughout history. Verse 1 simply refers to "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin."

These adversaries, or enemies, wanted to help in the building.
v.1-2

But Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and the other leaders of Israel, would have nothing to do with it.
v.3

Now, on the surface, it seems that it was a gracious offer to help, and that the Israelites were being rather arrogant and ungrateful, to say the least. On first reading, it seems that the

Israelite leaders ought to be criticized for failing to accept such a generous offer. But go back to verse 1. The offer came from adversaries, enemies. Now, what made those people enemies? Notice their claim at the end of verse 2. So who were these people, and what was the occasion of their coming to the land under Esarhaddon, King of Assyria? Simple answer, the Samaritans. They were most likely the descendants of those Israelites who had been brought back to settle the land of Samaria.

Turn with me to,

2 Kings 17:24 "Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities. 25 And it was so, at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they did not fear the LORD; therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which killed some of them. 26 So they spoke to the king of Assyria, saying, "The nations whom you have removed and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the rituals of the God of the land; therefore He has sent lions among them, and indeed, they are killing them because they do not know the rituals of the God of the land." 27 Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, "Send there one of the priests whom you brought from there; let him go and dwell there, and let him teach them the rituals of the God of the land." 28 Then one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the LORD. 29 However every nation continued to make gods of its own, and put them in the shrines on the high places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities where they dwelt. 30 The men of Babylon made Succoth Benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, 31 and the Avites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites burned their children in

fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. 32 So they feared the LORD, and from every class they appointed for themselves priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. 33 They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away. 34 To this day they continue practicing the former rituals; they do not fear the LORD, nor do they follow their statutes or their ordinances, or the law and commandment which the LORD had commanded the children of Jacob, whom He named Israel.”

To trace just a bit of history, then,

2 Kings 19:36 “So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went away, returned home, and remained at Nineveh. 37 Now it came to pass, as he was worshiping in the temple of Nisroch his god, that his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer struck him down with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. Then Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.”

History tells us the date was between 681 and 669 BC. These people were the hated Samaritans of the NT age. They were the half Jews, those who had intermarried with the heathen peoples brought to Samaria by the King of Assyria. And there spiritual purity matches their genealogy. They were hybrids, spiritual hybrids. That is, they claimed to worship the Lord God Jehovah, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But they clung to their heathen altars and high places as well. Such a mixed worship was clearly condemned. So what about their claim in,

v.2 “Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.”

The simple response is, “No they hadn’t.” They didn’t seek and serve the Lord God of Israel. They weren’t worshipping the

same God at all, for if your religion seeks to combine the true God with false gods, you get an entirely false religion! If you mix together a true God and a false god, the mixture is entirely false! Nothing true is left!

But that’s not what the Samaritans thought! They saw the Israelites, and they wanted to be counted among them. And the reality is, then and now, that,

I. OPPOSITION COMES TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD FROM THOSE WHO WANT TO BE COUNTED AMONG THEIR NUMBER.

Do you see how that works out? The Samaritans wanted to be included as those who worshipped the true God. They wanted their mixed religion to be accepted right along with the purity of the religion of the Jews. They didn’t see any difference.

Let me make a personal application. Think about the most well known Samaritan in the Bible. It’s a woman, an unnamed woman. A woman who had had five different husbands and was living with a man who was not her husband. And this woman had an encounter with Jesus at a well in Samaria.

John 4:7 “A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” 8 (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” 11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.”

She claims Jacob as her father. She is claiming to be included among the number of God's people. Yet she is amazed that this Jewish man would be speaking to her. And he certainly gets her attention, with an intriguing statement.

John 4:13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

She's eager to have the water of everlasting life. And she feels quite confident in asking. But right at that moment, Jesus plunges to the depth of her sin.

John 4:16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true

Now she's not so sure she wants to continue talking to Jesus, so she changes the subject, to a religious subject. Which mountain should we worship on? The Samaritans, of course, thought that it mattered very little where the worship was held, so they they could claim to be acceptable to God.

John 4:19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

Jesus totally removes any notion that a mixture of religion is acceptable. And he totally rejects the false worship, and false religion, of the Samaritans. He does so by pointing to himself.

John 4:21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is

coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Before we go back to Ezra, notice especially,
John 4:22 "You worship what you do not know..."

Jesus is saying to that woman, as he invites her to salvation, "You don't know God!" And the Samaritans of Ezra 4 are in exactly the same predicament as their later descendant in John 4. They claim to know God and they claim to serve him. But they do not know him at all! And so the inspired record of Holy Scripture calls them "adversaries." It is they who would bring the trouble and opposition to the building of the temple. The reality is that,

A. Some people claim to know the true God when do not.

And that is where trouble is usually to be found. And so the claims of verse 2 are false. They do not seek the God of Israel as the Israelites do. Again,

2 Kings 17:33 "They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away."

Surely that same situation is common in our day. There are those, perhaps many, who claim to know God when they do not! And it may well be that they will cause opposition to those who stand fervently for the separation of the true Christian church from

others. So our membership vows will exclude some! Those vows are exclusive! Intentionally so. Membership in this church is closed! Closed to those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God and that its doctrine of salvation is the perfect and ONLY true doctrine of salvation. That's exclusive!

In our day, everyone who believes in some god wants to include themselves in a large group of true believers! As if all religions are the same, as if all gods are the same. The name doesn't really matter. And if you wish to be exclusive, as the leaders of Israel did in Ezra 4, those you exclude may well be your chief enemies. Some people claim to know God when they do not. And similarly,

B. Some people claim to worship the true God appropriately when they do not.

Again, this is the real reason why the leaders of Israel didn't want the Samaritans helping to build the temple. Their worship was perverted. It was pagan. God forbid that they should be the ones who would build the temple.

v.3

Now, not doubt their help would have been of great assistance. But it wasn't worth it. Compromising on issues of worship are not worth whatever the benefit appears to be. Their offer was turned down.

The sad reality of our day, and of many churches of our day, is that there are many churches, genuine churches filled with genuine believers, who are simply not worshipping the true God appropriately, even though they would strenuously assert that they are! Those are the places where trouble often arises. Then and now! Anything you become exclusive, in your identity or in your worship, anytime you set yourself apart from others, or act

differently out of conscience, you run the great risk of provoking their opposition. The people of Israel certainly did. And the opposition was severe. So severe that we read in,
v.24

II. OPPOSITION TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD MAY BECOME SEVERE.

What happened? Well, in precise theological language, the Samaritans just stirred up trouble.

The chief weapon, or primary aim? Discouragement.

v.4-5

Their example shows us that,

A. God's people may experience great discouragement.

So much so, in this case, that the work on the temple stopped! Literally, the discouragement was to "weaken the hands" of the people of Israel. They disheartened them. They frightened them, or troubled them. They hired counselors against them to frustrate them. In the sophistication of our day, we would call that "psychological warfare." We could say, they were playing politics!

And that can be very discouraging. Such trouble, such opposition, such disheartening conflict can cause us to retreat from our work for the kingdom of Christ as well today. It's easy to slip back into our comfort zone, which is, of course, tucked safely inside these four walls. Thus, the day for such a godly rebuke would come, and it came through the prophet Haggai. But for now, the reality. God's people may experience great discouragement. Specifically,

B. God's people may become the victims of false and slanderous accusations.

The people of Israel certainly did.

v.6-8, 11-16

That's what you call "dirty politics." It is just plain untrue. There is no ground for those charges whatsoever. False accusations. Pure slander.

I don't know if you have ever been the victim of slander, but it hurts. And the deepest wound of such attacks is that the more you defend yourself, the more guilty you appear. It is very hard to defend against such slander, because you have to raise the issue yourself, and you get associated with it as soon as you raise it. The best answer to slander is often silence. The best response to false accusations is often no response. Just faithfulness and godliness. But that can get very discouraging, very disheartening, when the slander is apparently being believed. And in this case, it was believed. At least by the civil authorities.

v.17-24

It is a clear and obvious example that,

C. God's people may be opposed by civil authorities.

These circumstances are often reproduced today! Even as we saw a few years ago, civil authorities claiming authority to prohibit churches from even gathering together to worship. Such opposition from civil authorities is real. And it may become all the more real as the years of this century progress. God's people may be opposed by civil authorities. Especially is we are faithful to do that which these people did under Zerubbabel's leadership upon their return to Israel--preserve our purity. But trouble or no trouble,

III. THE PEOPLE OF GOD MUST BE FAITHFUL TO PRESERVE THEIR PURITY.

This is such a good example for us, because the people of Israel were so intent upon establishing and maintaining their identity. In distinction from the world. They wanted to stand out.

They wanted their numbers to be pure, for ultimately they had nothing in common with the Samaritans. "You nothing to do with us," verse 3. Nothing in common. The point is that,

A. Those who don't know God must be clearly identified in distinction from God's people.

And this is the point at which church membership becomes so significant today. And the sacrament associated with that membership, baptism. It is essential that we mark ourselves as God's people, and the outward mark of baptism accomplishes that. But to be a real mark, to be a real sign of the covenant, it must mean something. There must be a profession of faith connected to it. And baptism is intimately connected with church membership, for it is your standing in the church of Jesus Christ, the visible church of Jesus Christ, that identifies you in distinction from those who don't know God.

1 Cor. 11:12 "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."

But there is another side to that. Church membership is restricted to professing believers, people who have a credible profession, whose life demonstrates the reality of their faith. And so we exclude some people from church membership. And the process of joining the church includes meeting with the Elders of the church who ultimately are the ones who make that determination. And a church, to remain a church, must be willing to maintain that distinction by the exercise of church discipline. A church, to remain a church, must be willing to do whatever it takes to preserve her purity.

In that regard, consider the problem Paul had to address in

Corinth. The problem of immorality.

1 Cor. 5:6 “Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 9 I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. 10 Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.””

That principle is so clearly stated. Those whose lives and doctrine deny the faith must be put out of the church, and such language is meaningless without a doctrine of membership. We are to judge those inside the church, an awesome responsibility given to the elders of the church today. And like the people of Israel in Ezra 4, we need to maintain that distinction between those who know God and those who don’t despite the threat of opposition or trouble. No matter what the worldly consequences might be, we must be willing to say that the membership of this church is restricted to those who embrace Jesus Christ in life and doctrine. And we shall be compelled to put out of the church those who are wicked, who persist in their wickedness without repentance.

And finally, we, we the people of God, we must give ourselves

to the work of Christ. Following this noble example of Zerubbabel and Jeshua,

B. The people of God must together give themselves to the work of the kingdom.

Again, the offer for help would have certainly been helpful! The work would have gotten done more quickly, perhaps even more proficiently. But those pragmatic considerations were not the driving force in the minds of the leaders of the people. God’s people were to do the work, not compromise their purity so others could do it for them.

Look again at that great proclamation we find in,
v.3

What a great statement of faith? “We alone will do it.” “We alone will build to the Lord God of Israel.” So we don’t need to hire a company to run a stewardship program in our church. We will do the work, and it will be done through the faithful tithes and offerings that we alone will give. We don’t need to hire professional marketers, or an advertising agency to promote us just like they would promote the latest department store sale.

No, the work is ours. And ours alone. Now Zerubbabel and Jeshua were certainly giving their people a lot of credit. They were certainly counting on them a great deal. So for us, the work that is done is work that will be done by you, by all of us together. The work of the kingdom of Christ is the work which God has given to us, as his church. It is not work that we can hire out. There are no sub-contractors we can hire to work for us.

The implication of that is obvious. If you don’t do the work, it won’t get done. But here we stand, with all the bald and bold challenges of this text in Ezra 4. We must say to the world

around us, and to the worldly methods the world would offer us to build our church, we must say to them all, “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God.”

We have another model for church growth, a much better model.

Eph.4:7 “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. 8 Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.” 9 (Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) 11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

So these verses in Ezra 4 are very practical for us, for the work of building the church belongs to us. “We alone will build to the LORD God of Israel.”