

“Trouble”
Ezra 4
June 14, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about the three primary efforts made by the exiles upon their return from Babylon to Judah. Those three efforts are to rebuild the temple, to reestablish the Law of Moses and to repair the walls. At every turn, they will encounter trouble, and this trouble appears first in this passage and will continue through the end of Nehemiah. Israel’s first project was to rebuild the temple, and in the previous chapter we witnessed them making a good start to that. The foundation of the temple was completed, after which they had a great celebration. But not everyone is pleased with this. There are enemies nearby who immediately begin to oppose this effort, and who for a time succeed. Construction stops for almost twenty years.

God’s people have rarely been trouble free. The reason is that we are in a war, and warfare is always ugly, brutal and destructive. Consider how frequently the Bible uses language of warfare. It is pervasive in the Old Testament. Israel often faced threats from enemies far mightier than they, enemies who wanted to wipe them out. They called on the Lord in times of trouble, and he delivered them. But warfare language is also abundant in the New Testament, though it changes from a physical war to a spiritual one. Paul has a lengthy section on spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6, saying, **“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”** (Eph. 6:12). Paul told Timothy to “Fight the good fight” (1 Timothy 6:12). Today’s passage provides much-needed help in knowing how to fight against our inevitable troubles.

I. Expect Trouble

Just as happened with the original conquest of the land under Joshua, Israel here once again is invading enemy territory. As we’ve noted before, God’s grand project is to establish a home with humanity. The Garden of Eden was that first home, a home where there was perfect harmony between man and creation, between man and woman and between man and God. But that home was lost when Adam and Eve rebelled. But God didn’t give up, establishing Canaan as the new home for Abraham’s descendants. But just as happened with Adam and Eve, that home was lost due to the rebellion of Abraham’s descendants. Still God will not give up, and he has now brought his people back to the land to establish again his home with them. In doing so, they are moving into enemy-occupied territory, and the one in control of this land will

not give it up easily. Ultimately, the opponent the exiles are fighting is Satan himself. He hates God, but he cannot touch God. So he fights against God's purposes, and God's central purpose is to make a home with his people.

The chronology of our chapter can be confusing. Upon first reading, it seems to be all about resistance to the rebuilding of the temple. But the mention of the Persian rulers doesn't support this at all. Four Persian kings are mentioned in this chapter, though they are not mentioned in chronological order. The four, in the order in which they appear in the text, are Cyrus, Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes and Darius. But the order of their chronology is Cyrus (559-530), Darius (522-486), Ahasuerus (486-465) and Artaxerxes (465-424). That's a span of 135 years. Ezra ministered during the reign of the last of these kings, Artaxerxes (7:1). The temple was completed during the reign of Darius, about 60 years before Ezra came on the scene. So here's the point of all this jumbled chronology. Ezra is writing about trouble in his present, during the reign of Artaxerxes. That's what the long letter in this chapter is about. The trouble concerned opposition to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra mentions the temple rebuilding project as another time when Israel experienced opposition, but a time in which God delivered them from their enemies and accomplished his purposes, in spite of the formidable opposition.

We are in this story, too. The Church today is an outpost of the coming kingdom of heaven. We are the place where once again God is establishing his home, and this work is taking place on territory occupied for now by the enemy. So we should expect trouble. This trouble comes from without, as we are going to see in this chapter, and from within, as much of the rest of Ezra shows. But trouble there will be, and we are not to be caught off guard by it. Is the Church in America encountering trouble now? Though we enjoy many freedoms that are not enjoyed by the persecuted church in many places around the world, we still encounter trouble. Secularists view Christians as a problem, thinking that the world would be much better without beliefs such as ours. The political divisions of our culture are entering the Church and threatening the unity of the Church. We fight these enemies by knowing our enemy and knowing our helper. Let's look at that now.

II. Know Your Troubler

The Bible is clear in stating that our ultimate troubler is Satan, though he often uses human instruments for his malevolent purposes. He is determined and clever, but also very consistent in using the same arsenal against God's people. The weapons we see him using here are the very same ones he continues to use today. I see four of his devices here, so let's look at them that we might better know our enemy.

His first weapon is improper alliances with unbelievers. Judah's adversaries approach Zerubbabel with an offer to help them build the temple. **"Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here"** (v. 2). 2 Kings 17 explains the origin of these people. They were moved here by the king of Assyria about two hundred years prior to the time of Ezra 4. They were Gentiles from neighboring nations, and many of them intermarried with the Jews still remaining in the land. This is the origin of the Samaritans we encounter in the New Testament. Their religion was syncretistic. That is, it blended the worship of Jehovah with the worship of false gods. So when they tell Zerubbabel that they too worship his God, there is some truth in what they say. They would be analogous today to people who say, "We worship Jesus, but we don't think he's the only way to the Father." That is a modern example of syncretism, blending the worship of Jesus with our modern notion of religious pluralism that says that all roads lead to heaven.

So what's the harm in forming such alliances? Zerubbabel knew his history, and he knew that this had been the cause of so much trouble in Israel. It was Solomon's marriage to unbelieving wives that started the downfall of the nation. Instead of Solomon's wives becoming worshipers of Solomon's God, he began to worship the false gods of his wives. Protecting the purity of the church's worship is a matter of the highest priority. As Christians, we can work with others who don't agree with us on matters of common concern. We could, for example, work with Muslims in opposing abortion. But we would never let a Muslim preach in our church, or anyone else who doesn't fully embrace the Christian gospel.

Satan's second weapon is discouragement. **"Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah"** (v. 4). The word translated "discouraged" has a literal meaning of weakening the hands. Discouragement serves to reduce our motivation to do something. We're not told exactly how they went about bringing discouragement, but it is a familiar enemy to us all. It comes through a loss of hope and meaning in life. We sometimes feel like our lives are making no difference. The prophet Haggai wrote during this period when Judah had allowed discouragement to stop the rebuilding effort. Interestingly, one of the results of their discouragement that he speaks to is their shrinking into their private worlds. Their priority became the building of their own houses when they lost a sense of the bigger story of what God was doing and their place in God's big story.

The third weapon is threats that lead to fear. These enemies made the people of Judah afraid to build. I think it safe to infer that this fear came from threats. This speaks of the threat of persecution, which God's people have long endured, and are still enduring in many parts of the world.

The weapon given the most attention in this passage is a specific type of persecution, the kind that comes from governmental authorities. Verse 5 says that they **“bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia.”** We would call these lobbyists. They hired people to make their case before Cyrus, that what the Jews were doing was a threat that Cyrus should attempt to stop. Then we have the letter they sent to King Artaxerxes to urge him to grant a cease and desist order for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This letter contains a kernel of truth that is spun to make a falsehood. The kernel of truth is that Jerusalem in the past had indeed resisted occupation by foreign enemies. What nation has not done so? The spin is that this represents a danger to Persia. Judah will stop paying taxes and will even lead a rebellion in the entire region.

I can think of multiple contemporary examples of this last form of opposition, where a kernel of truth is spun to yield a falsehood. The church’s position on homosexuality is a good example. The truth is that we do believe that any sexual intimacy outside of a covenant marriage between a man and woman is sin, which position makes sinful all homosexual practice. The spin that’s put on that is that we hate homosexuals, which is a lie.

III. Know Your Helper When Troubled

What are we to do when troubled? We’ve seen that troubles are inevitable for Christians, and that our main troubler is a being who is both powerful and relentless, Satan himself. But we have a resource in the Lord that is more than adequate, and that’s the central message of this chapter. Israel’s need, and ours as well, is to know and trust God as our Helper. As the psalmist said, he is **“a very present help in trouble”** (46:1). This is the form our fight takes. We fight this “good fight of the faith” (1 Timothy 6:12), which means that our fight is to trust God. Our text teaches us three ways we are to look to God during times of trouble.

First, we are not to yield to the temptation to relieve our troubles through compromise. It must have been tempting for Zerubbabel to compromise when approached by the people of the land with their offer to assist him in the construction of the temple. Judah was small and weak at this time, and when you are weak you need allies to help you. The last thing you need is to anger potential allies, especially when those potential allies have great power. But, as we saw earlier, for him to have accepted their help would have been a compromise. He refused to do so, which served to increase their trouble rather than relieve it. Compromise is nothing more than self-trust. It is the attempt to address our troubles with what we can do instead of trusting God. Compromise feels like it makes us stronger initially, only in the end to make us weaker. Trusting God feels like weakness in the beginning, only to make us stronger in the end.

The second feature of trusting God is to rely on his sovereign and hidden purposes as opposed to looking for miracles. As we're going to see in the next chapter, the temple does get built. It happens not through some big miracle that God performs, but through a decree made by a pagan king, Darius. We often want God to address our troubles through some grand miracle, and sometimes he does. But it is a more common pattern for him to do so through his secret works of providence. And since these providential works often take time, part of trusting in God is to wait on his perfect timing for these things.

Third, we look to the temple. I need to explain what I mean by that. As we said earlier, Ezra wrote these words sixty years after the completion of the temple to address a new trouble Judah was experiencing. They were encountering opposition to the rebuilding of the city's walls. Ezra's point is to tell the story of God's provision during a similar trouble concerning the temple. He is saying, "God provided for us then, and he will do so now. Let's trust him." How does that apply to us? The New Testament teaches that Jesus is our temple. He is God's provision for making a home with his people. And just as the temple was a place of sacrifice, so Jesus came to be a sacrifice. If God would go that far to provide for us, surely he will do so in all lesser ways as well. He provided in the area where we are most troubled, our sinful rebellion against him that makes us worthy of divine judgment. Surely he will provide in all lesser troubles as well. This is Paul's argument in that well-known passage in Romans 8. **"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"** (8:32).

CONCLUSION:

What troubles are you encountering now? This pandemic is one trouble that has affected almost all of us. God calls us to trust him in the midst of this. Our text this morning suggests one of the ways we are to trust him in this troubling pandemic. We are to persevere without compromise in our duty to worship God. That's what Zerubbabel did when he refused the help of Judah's adversaries. We must do the same. I know that worship is more of a challenge now. If you choose to worship on site, you've got to wear this uncomfortable mask. If you choose to join us via live stream, you face all the distractions present at home. It's not easy, and it is tempting to take the easy way out and just say, "I'll skip both on site worship and live stream and rejoin when this trouble passes." Such a response indicates that you have forgotten the central truth of this text and of so much of the Bible. God is your Helper. Trust him even in the hard times. He is building a home to live with his people, and that home is not first of all about a place but about a relationship with him. And troubling times are one of our best opportunities to learn to trust him.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Ezra 4

1. What is a time of trouble in your life when God met you as your Helper?
2. What are the chief troubles you are experiencing in your life right now?
3. The first point of the sermon is that we are to expect trouble in this life. Peter said it like this: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). What benefits do we gain by not being surprised at troubles? What harms do we suffer if we let ourselves be surprised by troubles?
4. Zerubbabel refused an alliance with the peoples of the land to help with the construction of the temple. What are some contemporary examples of alliances that the Church should not make?
5. Discouragement is Satan’s second weapon. What are some false messages we receive that lead to discouragement?
6. This chapter, along with the rest of the Bible, teaches that we are to respond to trouble by trusting in God. The first way the text encourages us to do that is by refusing to compromise in an attempt to make things easier for ourselves. Can you think of examples of the ways we are tempted to compromise?
7. Is there a step God is calling you to take as you trust him during the troubles of this pandemic?