

Place Lurgan Baptist 30:8:2009

Reading: Ezra 4:1-24

## EXPLORING EZRA

### 4. OPERATION-COUNTER ATTACK

It is an often a repeated truism that where God is at work then Satan will be at work as well. Whenever God initiates a spiritual work there is bound to be resistance. *Is this not what exactly happened here ?* The euphoria of the foundation stone laying ceremony had hardly died down before their enemies launched an attack. You see, when God begins to move in power, the devil begins to move in resistance. So we can could write across ( Ch 4 )

**“Operation-Counter Attack.”** Those who if you are familiar with church history will realise that this is exactly what happened after the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church hit in what was known as **“The Counter Reformation.”** The Roman Catholic Church began to tighten up on things and initiated a number of moves to get try and regain ground that had been lost. In 1545 Pope Paul the Third called,

#### 1. THE COUNCIL OF TRENT: ( 1545-1563 )

Which was the most authoritative of all Roman Councils. It was at this Council that the position of the Roman Catholic Church was reaffirmed. Papal authority, the place of tradition and all the other teachings of Rome

were underscored. It was this council that declared that both the Bible and tradition contained the Word of God, that the two are of equal authority, and that it is the duty of every Christian to accord them equal respect. Then were,

#### 2. THE JESUITS:

Founded by Ignatius Loyola in 1534 and this was another instrument in the battle against the Reformation. The Jesuits were permitted *“to do evil that good may come,”* holding that *“the end justifies the means.”* In the Church of the Jesuits in Rome there is a plaster cast depicting Loyola with his foot triumphantly placed on the neck of Protestantism. But there was another instrument used in this counter-attack, it was called,

#### (3) THE INQUISITION:

Which according to Baker was *“for investigation and punishment of those who hold erroneous doctrines.”* The total number of victims of the Inquisition has been calculated to have been between 50 and 68 million.

So in one way or another the Roman Catholic Church won back some of the territory that had been lost during the Reformation. *You see, while God is a builder, Satan is a destroyer.* God’s purpose is to build up and edify, Satan’s purpose is to tear down and destroy. So every time God begins to build, you can be sure that the Devil will begin to battle. Opportunity and opposition usually go together, and the greater the opportunity, the greater the opposition.

Do you recall Paul's words ? “ *For a great door and effectual is opened unto me and there are many adversaries.* ” ( 1 Cor 16:9 ) Opportunity and opposition always go together, and that's exactly what we find here. For notice right away,

### **(1) THE ANTIPATHY TO GOD'S PEOPLE**

Did you notice that phrase in ( 4:1 ) “ *the adversaries,* ” that suggests, antipathy, hostility, opposition. Who were these people ? Well, look at,

#### **(a) THEIR IDENTIFICATION:**

We get a clue about this in ( 4:2 ) where it talks about “ *Esar-haddon king of Assur,* ” In the British Museum is a large cylinder and inscribed on it are the annals of Esar-haddon, an Assyrian king who deported a large population of Israelites from Palestine. These were the ten tribes who went into exile into Assyria in 722 BC, then the King of Assyria sent some of his own people to colonize the depopulated areas. *Do you recall what happened ?* These Assyrians intermarried with the Jews who were left in Israel creating a mixed population, who became known as Samaritans. The result was that this mixture of Jews with Assyrians led to a mixture of true and false religion. The Bible says, “ *they feared the Lord and served their own gods.* ” ( 2 Kings 17:33 ) It was a kind of syncretism that could have diluted the identity of God's people. I mean the law of God said, “ Thou shalt have no gods before me.” ( Ex 20:3-4 ) There is but one true and living God and true Biblical Christianity is

exclusive. It excludes every false religion. *Now is this note of clarity not needed today ?* With the influx of different nationalities there comes different religions, different cultures, different standards and we need to be clear and firm as to the true gospel. You see, we are living in an atmosphere where people are saying, “ *all religions are good and what we need to do is to have a cafeteria approach, and pick a little from this one, and a little bit from that one and just mix them all together.* ” The word for it is syncretism, mixing all religions together. My word for it is rubbish. There is only one true God, one true Saviour, one true Authority, the Bible. But do you see here,

#### **(b) THEIR PROPOSITION:**

“ *Let us build with you for we seek your God as ye do,* ” ( 4:2 ) I mean this was an offer of help, of cooperation in this great work of building the house of God. Why was it so subtle and dangerous ? Because if these outsiders had begun to mingle with the Jewish remnant, it wouldn't have been long for the two groups to start socializing and intermarrying, and that was contrary to the law of Moses. ( Ex 34:10-17 Deut 7:1-11 12:1-3 ) You see, Israel was a nation set apart from the other nations ( Num 23:9 ) because God had given them a special task to perform in the world ( Gen 12:1-3 ) and if they were corrupted, the success of their God given ministry would have been jeopardized. They would have led the Jews back into idolatry again. “ *Let's cooperate, let's sink our differences, sure, we may differ slightly, but let's*

*compromise for the sake of the common good.*” Do we not here this proposal on,

### 1. An Ecclesiastical Level:

When fundamentalists are faced with approaches from the ecumenical movement to join in with the work of building the church in the world, but at the expense of compromising biblical truth ? I mean here were people who were worshipping God, friendly and courteous, and who wanted to share in the building of God’s temple ? Was this not enough to make them acceptable as fellow believers ? What was wrong ? Just this. ***They worshipped other gods.*** And so on a church level today we’re told to “*sink our differences, to join together on a common platform, to forget about our principles,*” as others seek to draw us into the ecumenical vortex.

### 2. A Personal Level:

To compromise with unbelievers ? Do you ever hear the voice of the Devil whispering in your ear, “*I’ll give you pleasure if you are not so strict and tight in your faith.*” Sometimes he uses the voices of those in our families who are unsaved. I wonder have you heard those voices recently ? “*Can you not tone down your convictions ? Can you not give a little in your Christian faith ? Can you not be more tolerant of other faiths ? Why are you so dogmatic ? Why are you so exclusive ? Why can you not date non-Christians ? Who do you think you are*

*anyhow ?*” Did you notice something interesting here ? These “*adversaries,*” like the ecumenists, were amicable until crossed, for notice,

### (c) ***THEIR OPPOSITION:***

Do you see what happened when God’s people stood there ground and said “***no,***” ? Literally, all hell broke loose. Look if you will at ( 4:4 ) You see, this opposition was,

### 1. Purposeful:

Before leaving Babylon the hands of the remnant had been strengthened ( 1:6 ) by all those whose spirit God had stirred, but now back in Jerusalem, the people of the land weakened their hands. The word “*discourage,*” in the Hebrew contains the meaning of “*to weaken the hands.*” They were determined to undermine the work. So what did they do ? They ***demoralized the workers.*** The word “*troubled,*” in ( 4:4 ) suggests that they actually terrorized them. They employed tactics that struck fear into the hearts of the builders, and they did this to such a degree that the entire enterprise was brought to a standstill. I wonder, because of God’s work in you and because of God’s work through you, are you feeling the heat of opposition ? The Lord Jesus warned us did He not when He said, “*If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.*” ( Jn 15:19 ) Paul reminds us that “*all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.*” ( 2 Tim 3:12 ) Sometimes Satan comes as the serpent to deceive ( 4:2 ) and when that fails he comes as the lion to devour. ( 4:4 ) He will use friends and

family, times of joy and sadness, times when things are going well with us, and times when circumstances are against us. But always his aim is the same, to undermine the work of God and to crush the people of God. 1.

## 2. Professional:

For they used counselors against the Jews. That is, they employed professional help. Possibly these were corrupt Persian officials who were offered monetary inducement to thwart the plans of God. My .... the devil will do anything in his power to stop the work of God. At this very point in time in the south of England a Christian couple who run a small hotel, are being taken to court because they would not allow homosexuals into their premises. It could cost them their livelihood, but what would we do ? My .... make no mistake about, Satan is out to get you. For notice here not only (a) (b) (c) but,

### **(d) THEIR ACCUSATION:**

Now from ( 4:6-23 ) we have a parenthesis, that is a passage inserted into this chapter that needs to be marked off. You see, ( Ezra 4:1-5 and 4:24-5:2 ) deal with rebuilding the temple under Zerubbabel, while ( 4:6-23 ) recounts the history of opposition in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. Do you know that in films there is often a “*flashback*,” to some incident in the past, well, in ( Ezra Ch 4 ) we have a “*flash forward*,” to events which took place several years later. Why does Ezra, bring in these events at this time, since it breaks the continuity of the story of building the temple ? For one simple reason.

To show us the constant hatred of those who oppose God’s work. Do you know what the nature of opposition was at this time ? Let me give it to you in one word.

**Accusation.** They wrote a letter. That letter contained four charges against the Jews.

**1. Jerusalem is a rebellious city:** ( 4:12 )

**2. They will stop paying taxes:** ( 4:13 )

**3. The king will not be given the proper respect:** ( 4:14 )

**4. The king will lose control of territory:** ( 4:16 )

Incidentally, did you ever write a letter of accusation against the servants of God ? Can I warn you. Don’t do it. Do you know why ? You’ll be doing the Devil’s work. For do you know how he is described in the book of Revelation ? He is described as “ *the accuser of our brethren.* ” ( Rev 12:10 ) Satan accused Job of serving God out of self interest. ( Job 1:11 ) Satan accused Stephen of blasphemy. ( Acts 6: 13 ) Satan accused the Lord Jesus of blasphemy. ( Mk 14:56, 64 ) My .... do you realise that if you cannot get you outwardly he will seek to get you inwardly ? Do you know how he does it ? He will accuse you through your conscience. He will attack your motives, he will remind you of your weakness, he will tell you that you are a hypocrite, that God’s grace in your life is not real. You see, He never gives up. But we know that his accusations are false, for we have the witness of the Spirit within. “ *The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.* ” ( Rom 8:16 )

## **(2) THE AUDACITY OF GOD’S PEOPLE**

For how bold, courageous, uncompromising was their stand. Look if you at ( 4:3 ) I love where it says in the book of Philippians “ *in nothing terrified by your adversaries.* ” ( 1:28 ) You see, we need courage to take our stand against any kind of church, personal, and social compromise. We need to do it courageously, graciously, and firmly. Look at this passage and notice,

**(a) THEY RESPONDED NEGATIVELY:**

Do you see how they put it in ( 4:3 ) “ *Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God.* ” Those of a liberal and ecumenical persuasion would think that Zerubbabel and the leadership were terribly intolerant to refuse this offer of help from the Samaritans who after all were not godless people, and genuinely wanted to help in building God’s house. But their stand was uncompromising, for they realized that such cooperation would undermine the work of God. *You see, the question is, can we maintain a Biblical gospel and stand together with those who do not ?* **The answer is no.** Sure, like the Samaritans they may outwardly appear to be Christians, they may be friendly and courteous, they may want to help in the building of God’s spiritual house, but like the Samaritans, there are other ingredients in their faith we must take into account.

They deny the total inerrancy of Scripture, they dislike any preaching on hell and judgment, they decry the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus, they denounce the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead, they declare that the Roman Church is Christian. Spurgeon used to

describe this kind of preaching as using bits of the Bible as coat hangers on which to hang a few moral platitudes. Listen to what the apostle Paul says, “ *But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.* ” ( Gal 1:8 ) Jude tells us that we “ *should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.* ” ( Jude 3 ) My .... this is our official position to the ecumenical movement. We stand outside it, we stand against it, we stand opposed to it, for the Bible says “ *be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.* ” ( 2 Cor 6:14 ) Of course that does not only go for church matters, but for personal matters, for matrimonial matters, for social matters. Many a believer has weakened his testimony through an unequal yoke, a secret society, an unrighteous business partnership. Listen, they were not dithering about where they stood. “ *Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God.* ” (a)

**(b) THEY RESPONDED POSITIVELY:**

Do you see what they said ? “ *But we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel.* ” ( 4:3 ) Zerubbabel could have said, “ *Well, seeing as you will be only be mixing mortar and digging the foundation and hauling rubble away and seeing it is only carpentry and masonry and so on I suppose we could use you.* ” But he didn’t. My .... this great enterprise that we are engaged in, every facet of it is God’s work, and the Lord’s work does not need the help of the world. We don’t need the world’s money, the world’s machinery, the world’s mentality, the world’s methods, “ *we ourselves together will build unto*

*the Lord our God.*” ( 4:3 ) The Samaritans proposition was repudiated because they did not belong unto the Lord. You see, only believers are qualified to serve the Lord. Incidentally, that’s another thing we believe in. ***We believe in a saved membership.*** How tragic for churches to permit into its membership, unconverted people, whose unspiritual thinking will contaminate the whole fellowship. *You see, God’s work is to be done in God’s way by God’s people for God’s glory.* Are you involved in the building of God’s spiritual temple ? What part are you playing ? Are you saved ? As a believer have you been baptized ? Have you then submitted yourself to the rule of eldership of this church ? It amazes me how many believers there are who are out there on the peripheral, and have never submitted themselves to the rule of the local church ? Do you recall the pattern in the early church ? “ *Then they that gladly received his word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.* ” ( Acts 2:41 )

They received his word, that’s faith, they were baptized, that’s submission, they were added, that’s membership, they continued, that’s growth. But all within the orbit of the local church. “ *But we ourselves together will build unto the Lord our God.* ” ( 4:3 ) Sadly, our chapter ends on a down beat note, for we note,

### **(3) THE APATHY IN GOD’S PEOPLE**

Look if you will at ( 4:24 ) Now remember ( 4:6-23 ) belongs to a later period but in ( 4:24 ) we are back with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, back with the main stream that

has to do with the temple for ( 4:24 ) follows chronologically after ( 4:5 ) and shows us that apathy had crept in amongst the Lord’s people. The result ? The work stopped for and for 15 years not another brick was added to the building. ( 535 BC to 520 BC ) Two factors contributed to this apathy.

#### **(a) HARASSMENT FROM WITHOUT:**

The constant opposition had taken its toll. “ *Then ceased the work of the house of God .....* ” ( 4:24 ) Perhaps you’re saying, “ *I thought God was in this, and if God was in a situation it could not be stopped.* ” Wait a minute, don’t jump to conclusions. I want to point out to you that delays are necessarily denials. There’s a verse in Scripture that says, “ *Therefore will the Lord wait that He may be gracious unto you.* ” ( Is 30:18 ) You see, God has a purpose, indeed through Isaiah He says, “ *My counsel shall stand and I do all my pleasure.* ” ( Is 46:10 ) You see, Satan may temporarily delay God’s work, but he cannot permanently defeat God’s work. Do you recall Paul’s words ? “ *We would have come unto, even I Paul, once and again, but Satan hindered us.* ” ( 1 Thes 2:18 )

In building the temple, the opposition of the enemy to halt the work, the 15 years when nothing was done, these things would not determine the final outcome, only God Himself would. For while Satan may temporarily delay God’s work, he cannot permanently defeat God’s work. For the Lord Jesus said, “ *I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* ” ( Matt 16:18 ) You see, unlike us, what God begins He always finishes.

To all outward appearances it seemed that God's purpose in His Son at Calvary was defeated and that the agents of hell had won the day. Even those two on the road to Emmaus thought it was the end of all their hopes, " *we trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel.*" ( Lk 24:21 ) Then came Easter day and the resurrection, and far from being the end of God's purpose it was the beginning of a new era, the birth of a new church, the dynamic of a new power. My .... aren't you glad that the last word is never with men but with God.

***(b) DISCOURAGEMENT FROM WITHIN:***

The work ceased. The immediate cause was opposition from without, but the secondary cause was discouragement from within. For Haggai, who was a contemporary, tells us in his book that the people of God had lost heart, and thinking only of themselves and their own houses were saying, " *the time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.*" ( Haggai 1:2 )

1. They lost Heart: the battle was too much.

2. They lost Vision: they want back to put materialism before the things of God.

3. They lost sight of God: For 15 years they had an altar, but the freshness of their first love was gone.

Is this you ? Are you on the brink of resigning from some Christian ministry through discouragement ? Are you ready to call it a day ? To call it quits ? Some years ago someone gave me a little plaque that said, " *It's always too soon to quit.*" Why would you quit ? Sure, you have

the Word of God before you, the Christ of God beside you, the resources of God within you, the people of God around you, the glory of God before you. My .... " *let us not be weary in well doing for in due season we shall reap if we faint not, ( if we do not lose heart.*" ) ( Gal 6:9 )

Have you lost heart ? Has the battle become too hard ? have you lost vision ? Are you more caught up with the material than with the eternal ? Have you lost sight of God ? The outward trappings are there, but the inward reality of a daily walk with God is gone ?

**Turn your eyes upon Jesus  
Look full in His wonderful face  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of His glory and grace**