

Bible studies on Ezra

Ezra Chapters 4:5 to 5

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Background

In our previous study we looked at Chapter 3 & the first five verses of Ezra Chapter 4. The story of the return of the Jews from Babylon continued with the building of the altar, the start of the work on the foundations of the Temple and the interference from the 'neighbouring' people.

Ezra is full of truths that we can so often apply in our own walk with the Lord. Scripture gives us guidance in every aspect of our lives, enabling us to live a life of "*fullness in Christ*" (Colossians 2:10) as we obey God's commandments. We need to "*bind them on our fingers; write them on the tablet of our heart*" (Proverbs 7:3). It might seem like the most obvious thing in the world, but this is something that is not a 'one off'. We need to constantly follow this practice in our daily walk with the Lord.

The Message

We noticed in the first five verses of Ezra 4 that the "*enemies of Judah and Benjamin*" set out to deceive and discourage the Jewish people despite the decree of Cyrus. Nevertheless, Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the families of Israel stood firm. We too need to stand against deception, keeping our eyes fixed on the Lord. The way of the Lord does not allow scope for compromise...Jesus said "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6).

The 'enemies of Judah and Benjamin' were the people settled in the land of Israel by the Assyrians after the captivity of the ten tribes. They intermarried with the Israelites who had been left behind, and their offspring went under the general name of Samaritans. Originally they were idolaters, but having received some instruction in the knowledge of the true God they claimed to be worshipping Him, though of course, in an ignorant and superstitious way (See 2 Kings 17:24-41).

The interference that we read of in Ezra 4 presented a serious threat to the completion of the Temple. Indeed, work on the Temple actually ceased for a ten-year period until the second year of the reign of Darius (Ezra 4:24). If we look back to the Chronology we included with study 1 in Ezra, we can gain further appreciation of the setbacks and delays.

In the letter that was written to Artaxerxes it is possible to see how easily the intentions of God's people can be distorted and how blind people can be to the truth. The men of Trans-Euphrates cleverly word the letter to play on the king's insecurities and it subtly reveals their own reasons for wanting the work on the temple to stop. Whenever we are facing opposition to a work of God, praying into the heart of the situation in order to seek God's purpose is important.

Look at the response of the Jews to King Artaxerxes' edict. Firstly they stop work on the Temple - obedience to the law of the land. Secondly they seek guidance from God through the prophets. God clearly tells them how and when to continue with the building of the Temple and "*watches over them*" (Ezra 5:5). God also, working through the prophets, encourages the Jews to write a letter that although born out of the antagonism of the officials is a testament to God and His relationship with the Jewish people. This letter has a dramatic

response from king Darius not only authorising them to build the temple but also making sure that any further opposition to the Jews is firmly quenched.

This account presents many challenges to our faith. Do we seek guidance from God in our journey through life? Do we listen to God's prompting, about when to act and when to wait? Do we rest in the assurance that God "watches over us". There is only one response to this challenge of faith...prayer.

Questions

1. How do we respond to discouragement (verse 4)?
2. The Israelites must have known that rejecting the offer of cooperation from the Samaritans would lead to trouble, yet they were still prepared to stand firm. Are we prepared to "Enter through the narrow gate..." (Matthew 7:13,14) even if it is the hardest option? What advice would you give to a young Christian about standing firm in the Lord despite hardship?
3. When does our resolve weaken, and what positive steps can we take to be strengthened?
4. Why do you think that God permitted a ten-year delay before the building of the Temple could progress, especially since we read last week how the Jews seemed to do everything according to the Law of Moses (3:2)?
5. What catalysed the Jews into action again (5: 1,2)?