

The Adversaries Accuse

Text: Ezra 4:6-24

Introduction:

1. Up until this point, the work has gone on unhindered. In the last chapter, the altar of worship and the foundation was established. There was great joy and celebration at the laying of the foundation. Everything was going so well. The construction work was now underway. Then we encounter the word 'now' in 4:1, introducing an abrupt intrusion upon this happy scene. The enemy will not stay neutral to the work of God forever!
2. This chapter is full of helpful instruction on the character of the enemy we face. Behind the human instruments we detect the sinister movements of the Devil, seeking to bring God's work to an end.
3. The opposition came from the Samaritan peoples. Bible commentator M.K. Hall explains, "The origin of these "adversaries" went back to the time when, because of their idolatry, the Lord allowed the king of Assyria to capture Israel, often known as Samaria, and carry the people away into Assyria in the period 740-722 BC (2 Kings 17:6). Subsequently Esarhaddon, a later king of Assyria, colonised the cities of Samaria with people from Assyria and Babylonia (2 Kings 17:24). The "adversaries" are their descendants, known as Samaritans. Samaria was some forty miles (64 kilometres) from Jerusalem."
4. We note four lessons about the enemy's attack in the chapter. In our last message we covered the first two. We will briefly review then continue with the final two.
 - The Stimulation of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 1-2a)
 - The Strategies of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 2b-5)
 - The Slander of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 6-16)
 - The Success of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 17-24)

I. THE STIMULATION OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (Vs. 1-2A)

What was it that aroused the enemy's opposition? The enemy was aroused by:

- A. The Revival of the Remnant
- B. The Return of the Remnant
- C. The Rebuilding of the Remnant (Vs. 1-2a)

II. THE STRATEGIES OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (VS. 2B-5)

The enemy's strategies can be grouped under two main headings. He comes as:

- A. A Serpent to Deceive (Vs. 2-3)
 - The enemy's first approach is subtle.
 - 1. The Invitation of Ecumenism (Vs. 2)
 - 2. The Rejection of Ecumenism (Vs. 3)

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3. H.A. Ironside writes, “Their words sounded friendly, but their true character is given in the opening clause – they were *adversaries*. They sought the ruin of the little company to whom they had made fair protestations. These were indeed “the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). Had they once gotten a foothold in the city of God they would have destroyed everything that bore the sign of His approval. To have received and encouraged them would have made the remnant company numerically stronger, but actually much weaker. It would have been admitting the enemy within the fortress. The safety of the people of God was in separation. They were set apart to Him whose name they bore. To mingle with the nations could but insure ruin and disaster.”

B. A Lion to Devour (Vs. 4-5)

1. He Weakened their Hands (Vs. 4a).
2. He Troubled their Building (Vs. 4b).
3. He Frustrated their Purpose (Vs. 5).

III. THE SLANDER OF THE ENEMY’S ATTACK (VS. 6-16)

In reality this represents another one of the enemy’s strategies/devices but due to its lengthy treatment in the passage, we will consider it under its own heading. It is interesting that the word ‘accusation’ is used. Satan is called the “accuser of the brethren” (Rev. 12:10). In fact, the name ‘Satan’ means “accuser, adversary” and the name ‘devil’ means “slanderer”. We shouldn’t therefore be surprised that false accusation and slander is one of the devil’s chief weapons he uses against the work of God. It appears more than one letter was written but the Spirit of God includes the contents of the pivotal one that contributed to the cessation of the work. The letter that was written was a clever concoction of lies, truth and allegation. Letters are powerful tools for good or evil!

A. The Coalition behind the Letter (Vs. 6-10)

1. These verses document the large coalition of Samaritan nobles and peoples who were united in their opposition against the returned remnant and their rebuilding of the temple.
2. It appears that they wrote more than one letter over a period of time but the Holy Spirit selects the letter that was instrumental in stopping the work to be included in the biblical record.
3. The Ahasuerus of verse 6 is “likely the king of Persia otherwise known as Cambyses. The ‘Artaxerxes’ of verse 7 is likely the same individual. Actually, the name ‘Artaxerxes’ is more of a title given to Persian kings than a name similar to the title of Caesar of the later Romans.”

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4. The records of history show that the kings of Persia from the conquest of Babylon in 538 BC were:¹
 - a. 538-529 BC Cyrus the Great.
 - b. 529-522 BC Cambyses (son of Cyrus).
 - c. 522-521 BC Pseudo-Smerdis (also known as Gomates) – only reigned for seven months.
 - d. 521-485 BC Darius I
 - e. 485-465 BC Ahasuerus (Xerxes, son of Darius)
 - f. 465-425 BC Artaxerxes I (Longimanus)
 - g. Note: These dates in some instances the best estimates.
5. We are reminded of the truth expressed by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:9 “For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are **many adversaries.**” A genuine work of God has many enemies pitted against it. It is amazing how many people will unite against the truth! We are reminded that just because a large group of people agree together on something does not automatically make their cause just and right. People can be united together in the cause of unrighteousness just as those united in the cause of righteousness.

B. The Contents of the Letter (Vs. 11-16)

1. The Falsehoods in the Letter (Vs. 11-13, 16)

The letter contained several blatant lies. However, they reflect the cunning, manipulative ways of the enemy. They knew what buttons to press with a heathen king and made accusations that were calculated to arouse his opposition to the work. Three lies are told as follows:

 - a. Lie # 1 – The city and the walls are being rebuilt! (Vs. 12) This was a total and outright lie. The remnant’s focus was on the building of the temple, not the city and the walls at this time. The walls would not be built until much later under Nehemiah. For the Persian king, this accusation had strong political and military overtones. A city wall in ancient times was a major military defensive system and could allow a city to revolt politically. Notice also how the slanderers use name calling, labelling the city of Jerusalem ‘rebellious’ and ‘bad’. Slanderers love to use labels in their smear campaigns even though very often they are guilty of the very things they accuse others of.
 - b. Lie # 2 – the revenue of the kings is under threat! (Vs. 13) This is a clever and manipulative lie. If there is one thing kingdoms and governments are concerned about it is tax revenue! Governments will tolerate and even support all sorts of gross sins but the unpardonable sin as far as a government is

¹ M.K. Hall commentary.

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concerned is not paying tax. This lie was built on the first false claim that the city was being re-fortified. The devil is a master at weaving together a tapestry of lies as are those who engage in his work of slander.

- c. Lie # 3 – the king’s jurisdiction is under threat! (Vs. 16) Notice the strong legal language they employ – “We certify the king”.
2. The Façade in the Letter (Vs. 14)
 - a. They feigned heartfelt appreciation for the king – “now because we have maintenance from the king’s palace”. It was as if they said, “because you have been so kind and generous to us oh king, we want to return the favor as a token of our thankfulness and appreciation for you.”
 - b. They feigned concern for the honor of the king. They lie about their motive, presenting it as a selfless and honorable concern for the king’s position. Slanderers not only fabricate their own “facts”, they lie about their motives to mask their true intent. In reality, the remnant of God’s people were the ones who were the true and loyal subjects of the Persian Monarch.
 - c. The flatterer has a secret, sinister agenda behind his flattery. Consider the following warnings from Proverbs:
 - i. Prov. 26:24-25 “He that hateth dissembleth with his lips, and layeth up deceit within him; When he speaketh fair, believe him not: for *there are* seven abominations in his heart.”
 - ii. Prov. 29:5 “A man that flattereth his neighbour spreadeth a net for his feet.”
 - iii. Webster (1828) defines flattery as, “False praise; commendation bestowed for the purpose of gaining favor and influence, or to accomplish some purpose.”
 3. The Facts in the Letter (Vs. 15)
 - a. The facts about the past were true. Slander is not necessarily all lies. It often has truth mixed with the lies to make it more credible. The history of Judah’s rebellions was a documented fact which added weight to the accusation they would rebel again if given the chance to do so.
 - b. Satan loves to dredge up past sins and failures to discourage and hinder you from serving God.
 - c. The application to the remnant was unjust. The facts from history were right. The inferences they drew from those facts were wrong. It is not right to blame and punish people for the wrongs of others committed in the past. Divine Law is clear on this point. Deut. 24:16 “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.”

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- d. Note: This biblical principal exposes the error of the woke movement today that constantly uses the past failings of a nation to seek to punish and divide people in the present who are not responsible for things that took place prior to their lifetime.

IV. THE SUCCESS OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (VS. 17-24)

Sadly, the letter achieved the diabolical outcome for which it was intended and caused the work to stop for approximately 15 years. Never underestimate the destructive power of slander to undermine the progress of God's work.

A. The King's Decree (Vs. 17-22)

The slanderous letter clearly had the desired effect on the Persian king who was clearly concerned that the returned remnant posed a threat to his revenue and rulership in that region of the empire. The Persian king made at least two mistakes with his decision:

1. He failed to verify if the allegations in the letter were true or false. An accusation does not constitute evidence. A biblical principle of justice is that the accused be afforded an opportunity to answer the accusations made. Also, the accuser must furnish evidence to back the claims being made. This biblical principal has found its way into our justice system where the accused is to be afforded the presumption of innocence. That is, he is innocent until proven guilty. Sadly, many unwisely accept a slanderous report and don't bother to check the facts for themselves.
2. He failed to uphold the higher law in the situation. Under the Persian legal system, a decree of the king, signed into law, could not be abrogated (See Dan. 6:8, 12, 15). Cyrus had made a decree that the temple be rebuilt and therefore the opponents of the work had no authority to stop it from going ahead. Interestingly, the decree of Cyrus would be appealed to in the next chapter as a basis for continuing the work. We need to remember that Divine Law, the law of the King of kings, is supreme over every decree of man and if an evil law is passed, we can appeal to the higher law as a basis for continuing in the work God has called us to do. The Apostles are a good example on this point (Acts 5:29).

B. The Enemy's Delight (Vs. 23)

1. The king's reply was just what the enemies of God's work wanted. Their delight is seen in the haste with which they travel up to Jerusalem to stop the work from proceeding. Wicked men are slow when it comes to righteousness but are quick when it comes to furthering their wickedness!

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2. The fact they had to make the work cease “by force and power” tells us the remnant, to their credit, were very reluctant to stop the work.

C. The Saints’ Discouragement (Vs. 24)

1. “The opposition eventually lead to the cessation of the work as recorded in Vs. 24. This is generally considered to have occurred in 535 BC. The work ceased for a period of around fifteen years until the resumption in 520 BC.” (M.K. Hall)
2. The remnant clearly became discouraged through all the attacks of the enemy as they give up the rebuilding work and turn their attention to building their own houses. Haggai (mentioned in next verse) would later reprove them for prioritizing their own comfort over the house of God.
3. H.A. Ironside writes, “During the interval a period of apathy came in, so that the first energy for what was of God declined, and each one began to think rather of his own comfort and the comforts of his family. They turned to building their own ceiled houses, to storing up goods, and to attending carefully to their own interests. Of this the prophet Haggai accuses them... There is no hint of any suffering inflicted by the adversaries of the Jews while they were attending to their own interests. It was what was of God these wicked workers hated. To behold those gathered to His name devoting their time and strength to building for themselves excited no enmity, and the enemies’ purpose to stop the building of the house of God succeeded.”
4. The devil has not changed his tactics all these years later. His attacks against God’s people and God’s work are relentless and if we are not careful, we can be inclined to throw in the towel and give up. For the Jewish remnant of old, it meant the attacks died down. The enemy didn’t mind them building their own houses, just so long as the work on God’s house lay dormant and defeated.
5. It is a reminder that the sense of peace and success experienced by those who opt out of being an integral part of God’s work is not evidence of God’s blessing. Rather, it is a sad reminder that they pose so little threat to the devil that he isn’t worried enough about them to cause them any trouble.
6. The solution to the attacks is not to give up in discouragement and despondency but to stand firm, shelter under God’s Divine orders, and continue with the work.

Conclusion: Which side of the conflict are you on? Are you aiding the work of the slander or being a builder/soldier in the service of God?