

Dangerous Partnerships

Ezra 4 - NCBC, May 8, 2016

Main Point: **Be alert to the strategies of God's enemies.**

- **Friendliness** (4:1-2)
- **Fear** (4:4)
- **Frustration** (4:5)
- **Falsehood** (4:13-16)
- **Fleeting Victories** (4:23-24)

Application: **Love God more than compromise.**

Opening Announcements:

- *Doris Alvey's mother Dorothy Harper passed away this past Tuesday. Funeral was yesterday.*
- *Thank you for your generous collection for the Ecuador Earthquake Relief – Over \$3,000!*
- *Mother's Day*

<<It is Well>>



Because of God's restoring grace through Jesus Christ – together we can sing this morning – It is well with our soul. Hallelujah, what a Savior!

This morning we continue our study of Ezra + Nehemiah. Please prepare for the reading of God's Word from **Ezra 4**.

If you do not have a Bible with you today, our ushers are coming now to give you a Bible. Please catch their attention as they pass by and it would be our joy to give you a Bible. You are welcome to take this Bible home as our gift to you, or just simply return it after our service by placing it on the table in the back of the room.

One of the reasons I chose to do a sermon series on Ezra-Nehemiah this year was because our elders' desire for our church family to focus on leadership development this year. And Ezra-Nehemiah is a great place to learn about God's way of spiritual leadership.

Ezra + Nehemiah			
GOD RESTORES			
Ez. 1-6	Ez. 7-10	Neh. 1-7	Neh. 8-13
Restoring the Temple	Restoring the People	Restoring the Wall	Restoring Worship
Zerubbabel	Ezra	Nehemiah & Ezra	
Haggai & Zechariah	-	Malachi	
First Return 538 BC	Second Return 457 BC	Third Return 444 BC	

So what have you learned from our study so far? It's interesting to see that the beginning of Ezra and the end of Nehemiah both focus on Worship. Worship book-ends the biblical book that illustrates God's principles of spiritual leadership. That's probably not coincidental is it?

Loved ones – I pray that your hearts will be refreshed by God's restoring grace as you continue to submit yourself to His all-sufficient Word. Ezra-Nehemiah has much to teach us all about spiritual leadership – but truly we must first learn how to worship. For **we cannot rightly influence others until God has rightly influenced us.** And once you've experienced God's restoring grace – your greatest desire is to give your life back to Him in return. And that is what we call worship.

You will find **Ezra 4** on page **391** of the Bibles we've handed out. Please stand in honor God's Word, as I read **the first 5 verses of Ezra 4** in the English Standard translation. Verse 1:

4 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "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." ³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."

4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build ⁵ and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Verses 6- 23 give two parenthetical examples of the Samaritan's opposition from later years related to the rebuilding of the city and its walls ... so for now, please skip down to the summary statement in verse 24:

Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

This is the Word of the Lord.

You may be seated. **Let's Pray.**

I still remember a conversation my wise mother had with me right before I left for the University of Illinois as a college freshman. You see I had just graduated High School, and in many ways it seemed like I had life by the tail. But before this 18-year old Christian man jumped into his Ford Escort Wagon to live independently he had to talk with his mom at least one last time.

She looked me in the eye. Look at me Kevin. I want you to remember what I'm about to tell you. There's only one thing I want you to remember as you go off to school. Kevin, look at me. Are you listening to me?

Finally I assured her I was really listening and I looked her in the eye...and that's when she gave me the advice that would ring in my ears for the next 4 years that I lived at the university.

"Love." Whaaa? "Love. Kevin the most important thing you can do at college is learn how to love. Love others – even when they are different than you. But most of all son, Love God. Don't compromise your love for Him. Love. Kevin, I'm praying that God will teach you to love."

I suppose there's a lot of good advice that my mom could have given this young college freshman as I journeyed out on my own that day... but I'm so thankful that God saw fit to define my entire time at college by that powerful word – Love.

Because as you know, Satan goes to college too. Anytime you attend one of this world's higher educational institutions, you can expect to be surrounded by God's

enemies. In fact, every Christian in this world is opposed by God's enemies. And so the church needs to grow in our love. For Ezra 4 this morning teaches us that we must,



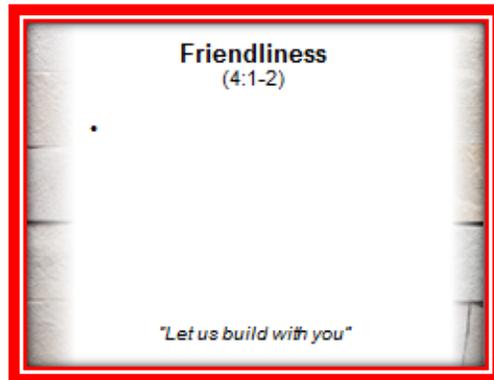
Be alert to the strategies of God's enemies.

Because we're not just vacationing here in this world, right? We're on mission. We are God's redeemed children – and we are engaged in building a kingdom for Christ in the midst of hostile forces. And we fully realize that no work of God will proceed unchallenged. **No work of God will proceed unchallenged in this world.**

So we must be alert to the strategies of God's enemies, if we are to be found faithful.

Ezra 4 illustrates 5 different strategies of God's enemies that we must beware of, for these are the approaches of our enemies which seek to divide, distract, discourage, and destroy our Christ-honoring mission.

We find the first deceptive strategy of God's enemies in verses 1-2.



Friendliness.

Now friendliness is not what you would expect from an enemy of God is it? But that's exactly why we must be on alert...for the enemies of God are content to gently lull us into ineffectiveness, even with a smile if necessary.

Notice verses 1-2,

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin ...

Notice their true colors are made known to us right away lest there be any confusion. These Samaritans are the adversaries of God's people...so when these adversaries...

heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to

them, "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."

Let us build with you! the enemies proclaim! There's really no difference between us and you Jews. We worship the same God you do, and we can help you.

It all seems rather innocent on the surface doesn't it? The work of rebuilding the temple was going to take years – even with the 50,000 Jews all working together to complete it. Extra hands, money, resources are always a good thing right? What does it hurt if we have some unbelievers help us every once and a while in our kingdom efforts? As long as they're willing to help, there's no harm done, right?

But notice the discernment and clarity in the response of Zerubbabel and Jeshua in verse 3,

"You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."

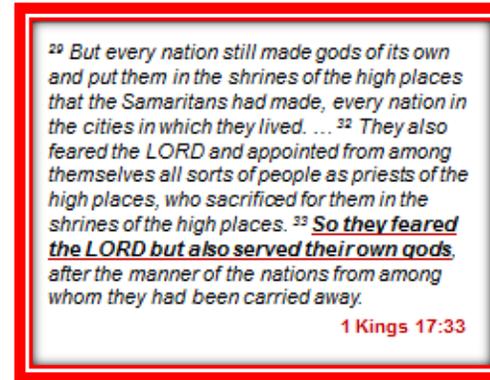
Enemies of God can have nothing to do with the building of God's kingdom. And **those who reject the exclusive authority of God are the enemies of God.**



Let me remind you of the history here. Back when the king of Assyria carried away the 10 northern tribes into exile in 722 BC, Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon sent some of the Assyrian people back into the land of Israel to colonize and repopulate these deserted areas.

These Assyrians intermarried with the Jews still living in Israel – thereby creating a mixed population. And since Samaria was the administrative capital of this new colony, they became known as Samaritans.

1 Kings 17 tells the sad story of how these Samaritans just added the worship of the true God to their assortment of gods they worshiped. Like modern Hindus, they were eager to add another god to their worship cult.



1 Kings 17:33 concludes with this condemning indictment:

So [these Samaritans] *feared the LORD, but also served their own gods...*

Dear church remember – **friendliness to Christianity is not the same as repentance and saving faith.** God claims exclusive authority. There is no other God like Him. And He has commanded clearly, *You shall have no other gods before Me.*¹

If we believe in the sufficiency of God and His Gospel, then there's no reason for Christ's church to form dangerous partnerships with God's enemies. No matter how attractive their offer of help might seem. **The work of God Himself never contradicts His revealed will.**

¹ Exodus 20:3



So are you alert to wolves that attempt to dress up as friendly sheep?

Church – we should be more careful and alert when we choose our teachers, our authors, and our mentors. Just because someone claims to want to help us become more spiritual... doesn't mean God desires them to have anything to do with us in building His kingdom here.

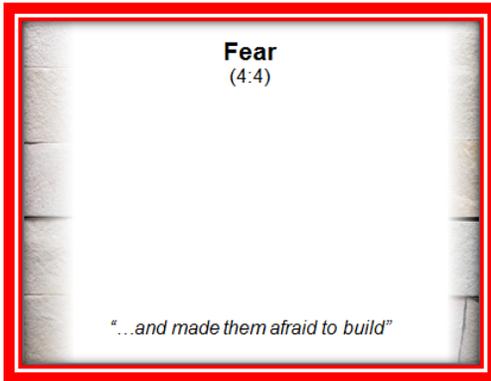
Remember what we learned about how to distinguish false teachers from Titus chapter 1 back in February?



Beware of anyone whose *authority is rooted in pleasing others*, more than pleasing God according to His revealed Word. Guard against the deceptive motivations of *selfishness and unbelief* that show themselves in God's enemies as they minimize both man's sinfulness and God's holiness. And remember – God's Spirit produces spiritual fruit wherever it resides...so reject the pragmatism of friendly Samaritans. Because of God's restoring grace, *we can love God more than this!*

God's enemies hate God. So it should be no surprise that if one tactic fails, they just take another approach in their efforts to destroy the kingdom of God.

So in verse 4, the true colors of these friendly Samaritans are revealed as they seek to stop the mission of God through



Fear.

Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build

These “people of the land” are the same Samaritans who at first seemed so friendly in their offer to help. Surprise surprise.

And when it says, “discouraged the people of Judah” it literally means, they set out to “relax their hands” or “make their hands weak in their work.” They sought to paralyze God’s people with fear.

Are you alert to this strategy of God’s enemies? Fear weakens our ministry as it asks, “What if?”



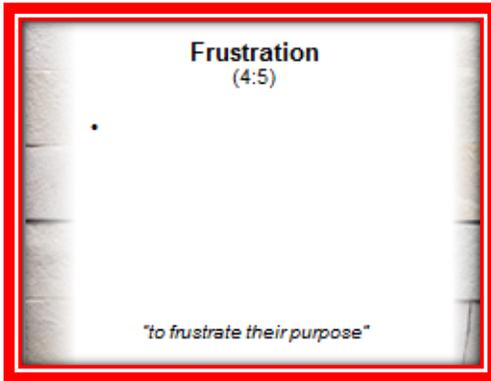
But living by faith means our questions are not focused on possibilities, but propositions. What now, LORD? Based on my faith in who You are... I’m trusting You to keep Your eternal word – so what would you have me to do now in the waiting?

Fear is always rooted in lies. God’s enemies want you to believe lies so that you will be unnecessarily afraid ... forgetting that greater is God’s Spirit that is in you, than he that is in the world.²

If the enemy can just get us to focus upon ourselves and our own limited resources, then we will quickly succumb to the despondency of fear. For fear is always self-centered.

So the Jews adversaries did everything they could to make God’s people afraid, and then in verse 5, we see another enemy strategy:

² 1 John 4:4



Frustration.

The Samaritans *bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose...*

Likely these were Persian officials that the Samaritan people bribed to make life difficult in every possible way for the people pursuing greater worship of God.

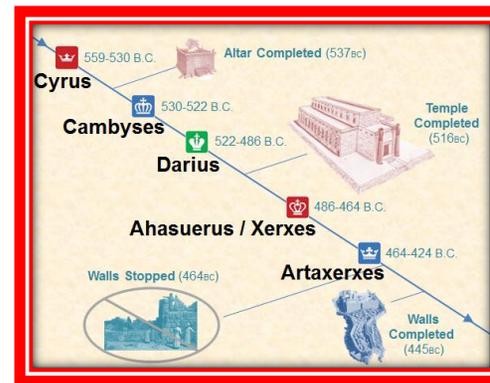
Church – in this world we will have tribulation, and be hated by all nations for the sake of Christ’s name.³ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.⁴ So **if your kingdom building efforts aren’t being opposed or frustrated by God’s enemies – make sure you’re still on mission.** For God’s enemies often seek to demoralize God’s workers with their threats, intimidation, and mocking ridicule.

³ Matthew 24:9

⁴ Matthew 5:10

Ezra the scribe wants to underscore the reality that this opposition to God’s people was not temporary but long lasting. In fact, it’s helpful to realize that verses 6-23 form a parenthesis where Ezra shares two examples of the kinds of opposition that the Jews had to deal with even years after the temple was reconstructed.

Perhaps a timeline would be helpful here.

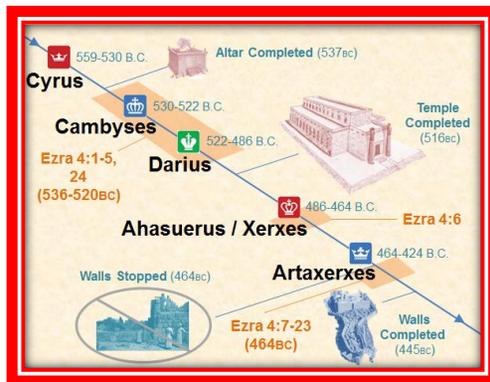


Remember the altar was completed under Cyrus’ reign, and in **536 BC** the Jews started rebuilding the temple.⁵ Sadly however, this opposition that we encounter here in chapters 4 caused the rebuilding of the temple to stop for 16 years. Nothing happened on the temple from 536 to 520 BC, as recorded in **verse 24** of our chapter today. Finally the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were used to awaken the hearts of God’s people and after 4 years of working together they finally completed rebuilding Zerubbabel’s temple around **516 BC**.

⁵ Ezra 3:8ff

But notice verse 6 of Ezra 4... which king is reigning over the Persian empire when these Samaritans delivered some Jewish hate mail to him? Ahasuerus! Otherwise known as Xerxes. The husband of queen Esther.

And then another example of opposition in verse 7... which king is listed there? King Artaxerxes. The letters which were exchanged between the bribed Persian officials and King Artaxerxes were likely exchanged sometime around 464 BC, as they were focused on the Jew's efforts to rebuild the city and its walls.



So don't be confused by the mixed chronology of this chapter. Ezra is just making the point that *God's enemies are persistent in their opposition against His work*. The opposition that the Jews experienced trying to rebuild the temple was not an isolated occurrence.

Church we are in a war... we must stay alert to the strategies of our enemy!

Be alert to the strategy of friendly foes, fear tactics, and mean-spirited propaganda aimed to frustrate our progress in our walk, worship, and witness in this world.

Verses 7-23 provide actual written record of correspondence between King Artaxerxes and two bribed Persian officials by the names of Rehum and Shimshai. And upon careful examination of their letters, we can observe a 4th common strategy of God's enemies. Spreading...



Falsehood.

You can almost hear the groveling snivel in their voices as they repeat several times in verses 12-16,

Be it known to the king. But what message are they seeking to relay to their emperor?

Lies. Wicked exaggerations, and falsehoods. Remember, Satan is the father of lies, so it only makes sense that God's enemies will employ lies and half-truths

whenever possible to slander and obstruct God's work among God's people.

Three specific lies are mentioned in this letter.



In **verse 13** – they appeal to greed and lie about the Jew's unwillingness to pay taxes. In **verse 14** they appeal to the King's pride and say it would not be fitting for them to witness the king's dishonor at the hands of the Jews. And then in **verse 16**, they again exaggerate wildly as if this little territory of Judah is a significant aspect of the entire Persian kingdom.

But this is the character of God's enemies. Deceit, false accusations, slander, and lies.

Now church – you know what's really sad about Ezra 4? This chapter records a victory for the enemy. God's enemies come out on top in this chapter. But verses 23-24 contain hope in the end – for all the victories of God's enemies are only...



Fleeting Victories.

Temporary victories. Short-term wins in a long-fought war which is ultimately won by God Himself.

Verse 24 says it most clearly... *then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.*

God's enemies may at times win a battle, but they always lose the war!

When Daniel's enemies in Persia got him thrown in the lions' den – it was only a fleeting victory – for God miraculously shut the mouths of the lions!⁶ When Stephen was martyred for his bold preaching of Christ, it was only a fleeting victory – for the blood of the martyr became the seed of the church! And church – let's remember this morning – that when Jesus Christ died on the cross by the hands of wicked men... God's enemies

⁶ Daniel 6

thought they had won! But this was just a fleeting victory – for 3 days later God rose Jesus from the dead in triumph over all His enemies forever!

You see loved ones... God's enemies can only win for a short time... but the end of all things is yet to come. And on that day – the Day of the Lord – all of God's enemies will be forever silenced and judged, and God will be the eternal victor in power, glory, and righteousness!

That's why the biblical doctrines of eschatology are worth studying and defending. God's teaching about His final victory in the end means so much to us! For **we can't fully know the biblical narrative until it's completed!** And Jesus wins everything in the end!

You know which side you want to be on in the end. So avoid dangerous partnerships. And



...be alert to the strategies of God's enemies.

So since we know these devious tactics, how should God's church respond today? I suggest that we must



Love God more than compromise.

It all comes back to Mom's advice doesn't it? Don't compromise church... but love God more.

Compromise is a great danger for God's people. It must be avoided at all cost. **Compromised worship is false worship.** A half-hearted commitment to Christ is as much of a commitment to the world as it is to God Himself. And God deserves more than compromised worship!

There is no doubt many Christians today are compromised in their faith and their lifestyles.

Are you a compromised Christian?

Since I'm a visual learner – let's see if a diagram can help us observe how compromise sabotages our love for God.

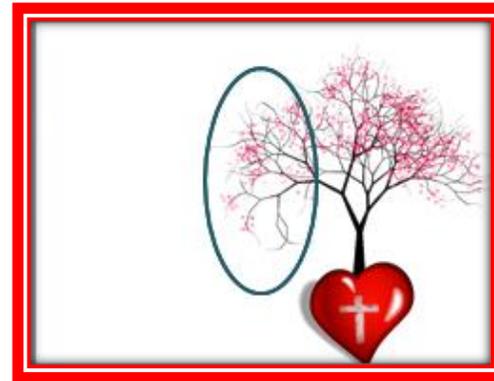
Here's how it happens.



This tree represents the Christian whose heart has been made new by God's grace. The word of Christ is dwelling in Him richly, and the life that he lives (and the fruit he bears) is no longer for himself, but for Jesus Christ who lived, died, and was raised again for his sake.⁷

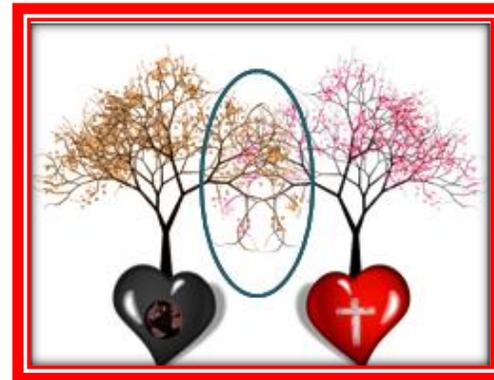
But as this Christian continues to live his life for God, at some point he becomes aware of some difficulties, or weaknesses in his life.

⁷ Galatians 2:20



This part of his life is not keeping up as well as the rest of his life. He acknowledges that he needs some help here. And so what would it look like for this Christian to compromise his faith somehow and fall prey to one of the strategies of God's enemies?

Here's how compromise functionally plays out:



The Christian appeals to an authority outside of God's word for help and answers. He plunders the Egyptians so to speak...borrowing principles of leadership, success,

and health from the world. And at first it seems so innocent.

After all – we can learn a lot from wise people even if they're not Christians right? What can it hurt if we have our friends in the world help us out with our present needs here?

But loved ones – notice the damning problem with all compromise. Even though the fruits of the world seem so similar to what we think we need ourselves... they are rooted in a different heart of worship. And **worldliness can never produce true worship of God.**

And yet Christians commonly embrace methods or helps that are rooted in an anti-God, evolutionary, materialistic philosophy of the world...all the while claiming their faith in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

Can you think of any areas in your life where you've adopted a worldly mindset for temporary benefit?

Church this diagram could be applied to all sorts of practical examples related to our approach to leadership, success, recreation and retirement, cultural relevance, politics, and psychology, which is just the study of the soul.

But we are called to love God more than this!



Church – let's pray this morning that God would help us repent of any compromise. Let's love God more than pragmatism. Just because something seems beneficial or helpful in the short-term doesn't mean it's God-honoring. Don't love the gifts more than the giver. Love God more ... for His love for you knows no compromise.

Root out any compartmentalized living. What sins are you justifying because of the praise of men? Love never compromises or alters truth based on the situation. Is there any greed, or pride, or love of power that is corrupting your pure devotion to Jesus Christ? There is only one God. You cannot serve both God and money.

I pray that God's Spirit will help us all to love Him more this morning. To learn from the example of Ezra 4. And avoid making any dangerous partnerships with the world that we have been commanded to evangelize.

You can never love and worship God too much that you get off mission. So repent and turn from all compromised living, and wholehearted surrender yourself to the love of

God. For there's no greater love than this – that God Himself laid down His own live to set us free to worship Him.

Let's pray. **Closing prayer.**



<<Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus>>

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² 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? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;

we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:30-39