

Friday - Ezra 5:6-17 - A Letter to Darius

The letter Tattenai, Shethar-bozenai and their associates send to King Darius tells us several things.

First, it tells us that work on the Temple was well under way by the time Tattenai came to Jerusalem. Secondly, it tells us that they asked for the names of the Jewish leadership. This would be necessary to know if it turns out the project is illegal. The letter does not say what their names were, but it does not seem that the Jewish leaders were embarrassed to let themselves be known to the Persian officials, as their answer is forthright and confident. Third, the answer the Jews give reveals that they had an honest assessment of the history leading to the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the construction of this one. God's covenant people had sinned greatly against Him. Therefore, He removed them from their land and destroyed their Temple. According to His promises, however, He returned them to their land by means of Cyrus who, in the year he conquered Babylon and became its king, decreed this Temple be built. Fourth, it reminds us that God is sovereign. While it was the Babylonians who destroyed the Temple, it was ordained by the LORD, and the Babylonians were His instruments, demonstrating His control over all nations and all events. Finally, the letter reveals that Tattenai and his associates were not necessarily opposed to the building of the second Temple, as some officials both before and after them were (as we saw in chapter four). Indeed, as we noted yesterday, they were even content to let the work continue until they should receive an answer from Darius. Though their statement in verse sixteen, that from the time of Cyrus "until now [the Temple] has been in building", may gloss over their own past failures, the confident answer the Jews give to Tattenai displays a trust in the LORD as the One who governs all things.

It is as true for us today, as it was for the Jews then, that the LORD is in control. We can be confident that He will accomplish His good purposes for us.

Q1. What are some things this letter reveals?

Q2. Why can we be confident the LORD will accomplish His good purposes?

Thursday - Ezra 5:1-5 - The Eye of God

During the days of the Persian Empire, Jerusalem was in the province "Beyond the River" - that is, west and southwest of the Euphrates. When the Jews once again take up the work of building a new Temple in Jerusalem, this arouses the curiosity of the governor of the province, Tattenai, and his underling, Shethar-bozenai. This is not surprising, as the efforts of the adversaries to the project had involved convincing government officials to stand in the way of the work, which might have given the impression that ceasing the work was officially ordered. Moreover, it had been sixteen years since work was last done on the Temple. An outsider to the events, such as Tattenai, might be confused as to why the project was resuming. Was it sanctioned, or was it being done in defiance of the king of Persia? Thus, Tattenai, Shethar-bozenai and their associates investigate the matter. They determine to send a letter to the current king of Persia, Darius, asking what should be done.

At this point, a remarkable thing happens. Instead of commanding the work to cease unless express permission from Darius is obtained, the governor and his men allow the work to continue until they receive Darius' answer. Though, humanly speaking, this may reflect a reasonable or lenient spirit on Tattenai's part, there was no reason he should let the work continue. If it turns out Darius is against it, he would have been wiser to have put a stop to it. If it happens that Darius permits it, at worst, several weeks of labour would have been lost, but the project would have continued. The underlying reason Tattenai allowed the work to continue is given in verse five - "The eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews". Psalm 33:18-19 tells us "The eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him; who hope in His steadfast love; that He may deliver their soul from death and keep them in famine". To have the eye of God upon us, therefore, means more than just that He sees all things. It means that He blesses and safeguards us as we serve Him. Philippians 1:6 assures us, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ". The eye of God being on the elders of the Jews meant they were blessed, protected, and given the means to serve Him. Likewise, the LORD will bless and protect us as we endeavour to serve Him, providing us the means to continue the project of building His Temple - the Church.

Q1. What does it mean when the "eye of God" is on someone?

Q2. What does that mean for us today?

Monday - Ezra 4:7-16 - A Poison Pen

A poison pen letter refers to a letter or note (or email or text message) that unjustly speaks evil of someone. As Ezra's account jumps forward in time to chronicle the ways the Jews were opposed over the years, he writes of such a poison pen letter sent from the adversaries to King Artaxerxes of Persia. Artaxerxes reigned from about 465 to 424 B.C., so these adversaries would have been those who opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Like the adversaries in Zerubbabel's time, these are Samaritans - descendants of peoples who were forcibly resettled in Israel by the Assyrians. (The "Osnappar" to whom they refer is probably Ashurbanipal who reigned from 669 to 633 B.C.). Their letter is preserved in the original Aramaic in which it was written. (Indeed, the text of Ezra shifts to the Aramaic language from 4:8 through 6:18 before returning to the Hebrew.) This letter slanders the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem, claiming they intend to rebel against the king of Persia as soon as the walls of the city are complete.

As we seek to serve Christ in the world, we may find ourselves the subjects of slander. The opponents of the Gospel will write poison pen letters, emails, text messages and articles about Christians. Jesus told us to expect this, and assured us in Matthew 5:11-12, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you".

Q1. Of what do the adversaries accuse the Jews of Jerusalem in this letter to Artaxerxes?

Q2. Should we expect the Church to receive such opposition in our day?

Q3. What has Jesus promised concerning such things?

Tuesday - Ezra 4:17-23 - The Answer of Artaxerxes

Yesterday, we learned of the letter that the adversaries to the building of Jerusalem wrote to King Artaxerxes of Persia in the days of Nehemiah. Today, we see the initial answer Artaxerxes gave to these people who were "Beyond the River" (that is, in the province of the Persian Empire west of the Euphrates River). Artaxerxes had decreed that historical research be done to find out if, as the accusers claimed, Jerusalem had a history of being a rebellious city. Indeed, it was found that it had given much trouble to those who claimed lordship over it, like the Assyrians and Babylonians. This small amount of truth, mixed in with the lies the adversaries were telling about the Jews of their day, was enough to convince Artaxerxes to order the construction on the walls of Jerusalem to halt until he might say otherwise. (In fact, Artaxerxes would later decree that the walls of Jerusalem be built. That decree, which came in 457 B.C., started the count of the seventy weeks of years predicted in Daniel 9, which culminated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the going forth of the Gospel to the nations beyond Israel.)

We must be on guard against lies mixed in with the truth. Much as the adversaries in today's passage supported a lie with the truth that Jerusalem had been a troublesome city to the Assyrians and Babylonians, the adversaries of the Gospel will support falsehood by mixing it with truth. Purveyors of false gospels will say many things that are true, or at least that seem like reasonable interpretations of Scripture, all the while undermining basic Biblical truth concerning the character of God, the definition of the Gospel, the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, and so on. We must take care not to accept anything that undermines the Truth God has revealed in Scripture.

Q1. How do the adversaries convince Artaxerxes to order the work at Jerusalem to cease?

Q2. What lesson might we learn from this?

Wednesday - Ezra 4:24 - The Work Discontinued

From verse four through twenty-three, Ezra recounts a period of history stretching from the 530s to at least the 460s B.C.. In verse twenty-four, he brings us back to 536 B.C.. Because of the opposition of the adversaries to the building of the new Temple, the Jews became discouraged and abandoned the work. For sixteen years, until the second year of Darius king of Persia (520 B.C.), no further work was done on the Temple. As we will see next week, it will take the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to motivate the people to get back to work, pointing out that a people who trust in the LORD have nothing to fear from men. As Jesus would later say in Matthew 10:28, "Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can kill both soul and body in hell".

Like the people of God 2500 years ago, it could be easy for us to become discouraged in the face of all the opposition we see to the building of Christ's Church today. We might be tempted to abandon the work, to neglect to preach the Gospel to the lost because our neighbours might not like us - perhaps they will even persecute us - if we share Christ with them. We must remember that those who trust in the LORD have nothing to fear from mankind. He will sustain us, and He will build His Church as we proclaim Christ to the world. There is nothing the adversaries of the Gospel can do to stop Him.

Q1. Why did the people abandon the work on the Temple?

Q2. When did the work resume?

Q3. How might we avoid discouragement in the face of human opposition?