

Study 3

Ezra 4-6: Hostility & Help

Ever had the experience of building a house or doing a renovation? It can be hard work. Plans to approve. Fittings to buy. Builders to organize. And of course you've got to find the money! Once the work begins you might even begin to wonder if you'll ever get it done. But imagine the Jews who have returned to Jerusalem. Their construction project is to rebuild the temple and the city. But along the way they'll be confronted with a few frustrations of their own. It's not that they can't settle on a wall colour. The issue is, their very lives are at risk!

Read Ezra 4:1-3

What's the offer that's made to the Jews and how do they respond?

Does their response seem right to you? Can you think of any similar situations these days?

Verse 2 mentions that these people were resettled by the Assyrian King. Remember, we read about this in the first study. That was the Assyrian strategy – mix up people of different races and religions and that way they won't organize themselves to rebel. It's recorded in 2 Kings 17:24-33. Due to the mix of religions, the Jews who did stay were influenced to worship other gods and adopt a false pseudo-Jewish religion. So if these are the sort of people who make their offer to the Jews in Ezra 4:2, why might the Jews' response to them be the right response?

The history of Israel shows their folly of mixing with the other nations around them. God commanded Israel to be distinct, to not compromise, to demonstrate their 'specialness' by worshipping Him only and keeping his law. But again and again they failed. They blended in. The false gods of the nations around them became their gods. So this stand that the Jews are making at the construction of the temple is a good one.

Read Ezra 4:3-6:22. Along the way try to count the number of times that the Jews are opposed in their efforts of rebuilding.

In what form does the opposition come?

How did you go at picking the number of times the attempt is made to stop the Jews? There is the opposition from those people who supposedly wanted to help! (4:4-5). There is a letter of opposition to Ahasuerus the Persian King (4:6). There is the letter of opposition to Artaxerxes the Persian King and his subsequent command (4:7-23). And there is the opposition of Tattenai, governor of the province, and his letter to Darius the Persian King (5:3-17). In other words, there is opposition all round!

In what ways has this opposition worked? (4:4-5; 4:23-24).

Before we go any further, it's worth noting that the chronology of these chapters is not strictly in order. See the table below. Much of chapter 4 (4:6-23) takes the story well into the future during the reigns of the Persian Kings Ahasuerus and Xerxes, before returning to Darius (4:24). Movies often have a "flashback" scene – this is more a "flash forward." The theme remains the same - hostility, opposition.... and God's help.

Persian Kings	Chronology of Events recorded in Ezra
539-530 BC -Cyrus	538 – Exiles return to Jerusalem (1:1) 537 – Temple Reconstruction Begins (3:1)
530-522 - Cambyses	
522-486 - Darius 1	? – letter to Darius; Order to continue rebuilding the temple (5:1-6:12) 516 – Completion of the <u>temple</u> (6:15)
486-464 - Ahasuerus	? – letter written to Ahasuerus (4:6)
464-423 -Artaxerxes I	? – letter to Artaxerxes; Order to stop rebuilding the <u>city</u> (4:7-23) 458 -Ezra arrives in Jerusalem (7:1-9)

Given all this opposition, what is surprising about the events of 6:16-18?

Even with all this opposition, the temple is still completed. Who is the figure who helps the Jews? And how does he help? (6:1-12)

What seems to be his motivation? (6:10)



On the Cyrus Cylinder (we looked at it in study 1), are some words which show that Darius' motivation was not that uncommon. On it are the words, 'May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily the gods Bel and Nebo for a long life for me...'

Is the temple completed just because of the decrees of the Persian king?
What does 6:14 say?

What does this tell us about God?

Ezra and Jesus

Notice what the Israelites do at the time of the temple completion – 6:16-22. They celebrate. And what a joyous celebration it is! The word 'joy' comes up three times in this section (v16, v23). Why do they celebrate? v22

What feast do they celebrate and when was this feast first given?

What do they do (v21) to allow them to take part in this celebration?

The people know that God has been good to them. God has been at work to turn the heart of this foreign pagan King, to not only *allow*, but also to *assist* them in building the temple. And they know that they can only celebrate God's goodness to them in the present, because of God's goodness to them in the past – the original Passover. It's also interesting to note that as we saw in chapter 4, the people are concerned to keep themselves separate from the nations and pure in their worship of God.

But it's sad to realise that from our position we know where the story goes. This celebration will eventually turn into crying. In the next few chapters, their desire for purity will turn to compromise. It seems it's one thing to turn the heart of the King, but it's another for God's own people to have a heart that's truly devoted to Him.

From our position we know the one who brings a true change in heart – Jesus. Through his death on the cross and his sending of the Spirit we are changed and forgiven. Jesus himself took part in the Passover Feast, but he showed us that it is a pointer to his own death. We rejoice in God's goodness to us in our present, but we know it's based on God's amazing goodness in the past – Jesus' sacrifice for us.

So what about the temple?

The coming of Jesus brought a huge change in our thinking about the temple. The temple, or "house of God", was a building that symbolized God's

presence with his people. With Jesus, that presence was real and “in person.” And with the coming of the Spirit, the change is even more profound.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9-17.

What building is God interested in now?

What – or who – is the foundation?

It’s important to notice that the “you” Paul is talking about is the PLURAL YOU. It’s “you together.” He and Apollos and other fellow workers are constructing a whole new temple... made of people!

Where does God’s Spirit now dwell?

How could a person “destroy God’s temple” (v17)? What do we need to be especially careful about?

Paul takes up the same idea in Ephesians 2:19-22. What main point do you think he makes from the fact that “we (together) are God’s temple?”

People often call a church building “the House of God.” But it’s not! The building God is interested in is the one made up of people. What impact should this have in our priorities as a church?