



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Ezra 4:1-24 - 5:5

Topic

Ezra lists the many strategies Israel's enemies used to discourage them from building the Temple

Title

*"Weapons of Mass Discouragement"*

What would you say is the devil's most effective weapon?

The story is told about an old demon who was planning to retire. He put up for auction all the weapons which he had accumulated over the years. They ranged from envy to laziness to gossip to lust.

Off to one side lay a harmless looking instrument labeled "Discouragement."

It was priced far above the rest.

When a junior demon asked about the weapon, the old demon said, “Many people have been able to resist attacks from my other weapons, but as soon as I deployed ‘discouragement,’ they would fall into the trap, and it would be easy to defeat them,” he explained.

Is discouragement really that powerful a weapon? Ask Elijah.

In an incredible spiritual showdown on Mount Carmel, Elijah embarrassed, then put to death, 400 false prophets of Baal.

Queen Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah. He reacted by running for his life. At one point “he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I *am* no better than my fathers!" (First Kings 19:4).

Later, while hiding in a cave, he complained, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed

Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life” (First Kings 19:10).

After this bout with discouragement, Elijah did very little, except anoint Elisha to take his place.

So, yes, discouragement *is* a powerful weapon against the servant of God.

The first wave of exiles who returned to Jerusalem had rebuilt the altar of the Lord and established daily and annual sacrifices. They were keeping the seven calendar feasts of the Lord. They had laid the foundation for the Temple.

Then we read in verse four of chapter four, “the people of the land tried to **discourage** the people of Judah. They troubled them in building.”

Drop down to verse twenty-four:

Ezra 4:24 Thus the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem ceased, and it was

discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

**Discouragement was the primary weapon that halted them in their building.**

You and I are “are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). We are also, individually, a building project of Jesus’ as He works each day to complete what He has begun in us.

Discouragement is a key weapon that will be used against us to bring building to a halt. If we’re not careful, it could end our usefulness as servants of Jesus.

I’ll organize my comments around two points: #1 Discouragement Should Come As No Surprise To You, and #2 Discouragement Will Keep Coming As A Strategy Against You.

**#1 Discouragement Should Come  
As No Surprise To You**  
(4:1-5 & 24 - 5:1-5)

It was Benjamin Franklin, who wrote in a 1789 letter, that “Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

Death isn't really certain - not for a person in Christ. When Jesus comes for His church, He will resurrect the dead, then living believers will be raptured - without ever dying.

**“Discouragement and taxes”** *is* certain.

Ezra 4:1 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the LORD God of Israel,

Ezra 4:2 they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers' *houses*, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you *do*; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."

Ezra 4:3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers' *houses* of Israel said to them, "You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."

After the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, and the Jews were carried off, foreigners settled in the land. It was common to acknowledge that each nation had its own local deities. After settling in the land, they added the God of Israel as another one of their many gods. They were pagan idolators. Compromise with them would only mean contamination.

It reminds me of the admonition of the apostle Paul that we not become "unequally yoked" with nonbelievers" (Second Corinthians 6:14).

We are definitely to be among nonbelievers, sharing Jesus. But we should not enter into partnerships with them, e.g., marriage.

Nothing will cause you more discouragement than being unequally yoked.

Ezra 4:4 Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building,

The returnees had a lot to be encouraged about:

- God was for them; they had God's Word to guide them.
- The king of Persia was for them; they had the government's word to guard them.

All the more reason to think discouragement would be so effective a strategy.

There's a passage in the New Testament that declares people are ensnared by the devil, describing them as "having been taken captive by him to *do* his will" (Second Timothy 2:26).

They aren't possessed; they're influenced to oppose the things of God, and the people of God. They become the major delivery system for the weapon of discouragement.

Ever wonder why you have so much drama at work? The nonbelievers there are being influenced to discourage you. Sadly, sometimes, so are some believers.

Ezra 4:5 and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The word "counselors" is variously translated as "bribed officials" or "propagandists." The enemies started a campaign against the returnees, using all the men and means that were at their disposal to discourage the building.

Drop down to the last verse of chapter four - verse twenty-four.



Ezra 4:24 Thus the work of the house of God which *is* at Jerusalem ceased, and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The weapon of discouragement struck a debilitating blow to the building of the Temple.  
**The work “ceased” for the next fifteen years.**

Like Elijah, the Jews had experienced a spiritual high - only to be victimized by discouragement.

I'll admit that some people are less susceptible to discouragement than others. But it is not something anyone can avoid. That is to again say, discouragement is coming.

It's coming, but **discouragement can be overcome**. Chapter five picks-up the story at the end of the fifteen year work stoppage.

Ezra 5:1 Then the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophets, prophesied to the Jews who *were* in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, *who was* over them.

Several books ought to be read in conjunction with Ezra:

- Nehemiah and Esther are the books of history about this period of restoration.
- Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi are the books of prophecy about this period of restoration.

At the end of verse twenty-four of chapter four the writer jumped ahead fifteen years to when Darius was king of Persia. That is exactly where Haggai begins:

Haggai 1:1 In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying,

Haggai 1:2 "Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, saying: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time that the LORD's house should be built." ' "

Haggai 1:3 Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying,

Haggai 1:4 "*Is it* time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple *to lie* in ruins?"

Haggai 1:5 Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways!

Haggai 1:6 "You have sown much, and bring in little; You eat, but do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; And he who earns wages, Earns wages *to put* into a bag with holes."

Haggai 1:7 Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways!

Haggai 1:8 Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified," says the LORD.

One of the goals of the devil, in using discouragement, is to get you to quit serving the Lord. It's pretty clear from this prophecy that discouragement is no excuse to slow down, or to quit, building for the Lord.

I hear all the time about believers in Christ who no longer attend any fellowship because of some discouragement they suffered at a church. To paraphrase Haggai's words, they "dwell in [their] paneled houses," giving no thought to the fact they are living stones meant to be part of building the Lord's precious church on earth.

Ezra 5:2 So Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak rose up and began to build the house of God which *is* in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God *were* with them, helping them.

Just like that, they returned to the work. It is attributed to the Word of God as spoken through the prophets.

Listen - when you are discouraged, and especially if you are thinking about quitting, and withdrawing to your house, or some cave like Elijah, **you have no permission from God.** You are out of His will.

Ezra 5:3 At the same time Tattenai the governor of *the region* beyond the River and Shethar-Boznai and their companions came to them and spoke thus to them: "Who has commanded you to build this temple and finish this wall?"

Ezra 5:4 Then, accordingly, we told them the names of the men who were constructing this building.

Ezra 5:5 But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them cease till a report could go to Darius. Then a written answer was returned concerning this *matter*.

The enemies of Israel wanted to know the names of those working on the Temple. It was a more sinister threat.

Regardless, this time, discouragement was ineffective. Make note of that: *Discouragement need not be effective*. It can be avoided, not just overcome. There are probably many ways to avoid it. The one highlighted in this situation is knowing you are in God's will, doing God's work.

The encouragement of the Holy Spirit cancels out discouragement.

The best words I can quote regarding discouragement are those of Jesus on the night before He died on the Cross. It's a profound understatement to say that His disciples were discouraged:

- One of them turned-out to be a traitor.
- Their mission, for all they could see, had failed.
- Their own lives were in danger

Do you remember Jesus' words to them? They are words to us, too. He said,

John 14:1 "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.

John 14:2 In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

John 14:3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, *there* you may be also.

John 14:4 And where I go you know, and the way you know."

Your heart needs to believe those words of Jesus. The more you do, the less you will be troubled by discouragement.

## #2 Discouragement Will Keep Coming As A Strategy Against You (4:6-23)

You're familiar with what is called flash-forward:

- In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge experiences a flash forward, as the ghost of Christmas future takes him to see what his life (and death) will be like if he does not change his selfish ways.
- In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, there is a flash forward scene of nuclear destruction, that the characters in the present day are working to prevent.

We skipped verses six through twenty-three in chapter four because they are a flash-forward. They give a broad overview of resistance to the work of rebuilding the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, through the reigns of several Persian kings, extending into the days of Nehemiah.

Why did Ezra use this literary device? I can suggest one reason: It establishes that discouragement is always coming.

Ezra 4:6 In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ezra 4:7 In the days of Artaxerxes also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, and the rest of their companions wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the letter *was* written in Aramaic script, and translated into the Aramaic language.

The enemies made good their threats to expose the returnees to those higher-up in the government.



You've heard the expression that begins, "Tough times don't last." Well, they do. Or, at least, they can. We've been taught to think that God will end our tough time as soon as we learn a lesson, or do something spiritual. That thought will only set you up for further discouragement.

Ezra 4:8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes in this fashion:

Ezra 4:9 From Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions - *representatives* of the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the people of Persia and Erech and Babylon and Shushan, the Dehavites, the Elamites,

Ezra 4:10 and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnapper took captive and settled in the cities of Samaria and the remainder beyond the River - and so forth.

Ever feel like everyone is against you? *They might be.*

Ezra 4:11 (This *is* a copy of the letter that they sent him) To King Artaxerxes from your servants, the men *of the region* beyond the River, and so forth:

Ezra 4:12 Let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem, and are building the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing *its* walls and repairing the foundations.

Ezra 4:13 Let it now be known to the king that, if this city is built and the walls completed, they will not pay tax, tribute, or custom, and the king's treasury will be diminished.

Remember that nonbelievers are taken captive by the devil. One of his titles is the Accuser. When you're falsely accused, *he is the source*.

Ezra 4:14 Now because we receive support from the palace, it was not proper for us to see the king's dishonor; therefore we have sent and informed the king,

Ezra 4:15 that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. And you will find in

the book of the records and know that this city *is* a rebellious city, harmful to kings and provinces, and that they have incited sedition within the city in former times, for which cause this city was destroyed.

Why was Jerusalem destroyed? It was destroyed as a discipline from God for the rebellion of His people against Him - *not* against other earthly kings. These guys had no idea Who they were dealing with.

Ezra 4:16 We inform the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, the result will be that you will have no dominion beyond the River.

Ezra 4:17 The king sent an answer: To Rehum the commander, *to* Shimshai the scribe, *to* the rest of their companions who dwell in Samaria, and *to* the remainder beyond the River: Peace, and so forth.

Ezra 4:18 The letter which you sent to us has been clearly read before me.

Ezra 4:19 And I gave the command, and a search has been made, and it was found that this city in former times has revolted against kings, and rebellion and sedition have been fostered in it.

Ezra 4:20 There have also been mighty kings over Jerusalem, who have ruled over all *the region* beyond the River; and tax, tribute, and custom were paid to them.

Ezra 4:21 Now give the command to make these men cease, that this city may not be built until the command is given by me.

Ezra 4:22 Take heed now that you do not fail to do this. Why should damage increase to the hurt of the kings?

By this point, the Temple had been rebuilt. Only the walls surrounding Jerusalem still lay in ruin.

The king said, “until the command is given by me.” That left hope, which would be realized when this same king gave permission to his servant, Nehemiah, to return and build the walls.

Ezra 4:23 Now when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter *was* read before Rehum, Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem against the Jews, and by force of arms made them cease.

This time the returnees did not cave in to discouragement. They stopped building the walls because they were good citizens.

I'm guessing a lot of us are discouraged on some level. Learn from Elijah and don't cave-in to it.

“Let not your heart be troubled.” Those words are first a comfort, but second, a command - meaning it is something you **can** obey.

Set your heart on the things above; and things that are future.

