

BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

Ezra Nehemiah Esther

People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).

Ezra

Chapter Four

"Spiritual Harassment"

Introduction

It's a phrase you are going to hear more and more: Spiritual harassment. It's a combination of political correctness and our culture's determination to label everyone a victim of something or someone.

I came across a few pending lawsuits that are using the phrase. Here is a quote from one of them:

"A client of mine had been the victim of **spiritual harassment** in the workplace. This harassment led her to completely break down and become a psychiatric patient. Having had a high level of self-confidence and highly respected in her ability to perform, this client slid into total despair often thinking about taking her life. All she felt was shame. A deep depression led her to alcohol, recreational drugs and pharmaceuticals."

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you are no stranger to spiritual harassment. In fact, *you should expect it!* You discover early in your walk with the Lord that you have adversaries who seek to harass you in order to halt your spiritual progress.

We're going to discover and discuss a few of those adversaries today. They are illustrated for us by the story of the Jewish exiles who returned to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. They were harassed and they allowed it to halt their building project for sixteen years.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Your Adversaries Will Harass You While You're Building, #2 Have Your Adversaries Halted You From Building?

#1 Your Adversaries Will Harass You
While You're Building
(v1-16)

The first verse of chapter four introduces us to our theme:

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,

There were **adversaries**. It's a reminder that we are engaged in a spiritual warfare. Normally, when we think of spiritual warfare, our mind races to images of the devil and his demons. While we do wrestle against his principalities and powers, they usually manifest themselves through ordinary people. The returnees who were rebuilding the Temple were opposed by their neighbors; so will we be.

As you read the narrative you can identify certain *spiritual* adversaries represented by the actions of their neighbors. The first one is compromise, in verse two.

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."

When they said, **we seek your God as you do**, it wasn't true. The Assyrians had conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel. They removed many of the Jews and repopulated the area with other conquered peoples. Those people, and their offspring, were introduced to Jewish religious customs, but mixed them with the worship of their own gods.

This background helps you to understand the response (in verse three) of the returnees who were rebuilding the Temple.

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."

The leaders of Israel recognized that the surrounding people were asking them to compromise their faith, to include other gods and beliefs.

Christianity is often criticized for being too narrow minded. After all, how can Jesus be the exclusive way to God? How can He alone be the truth? How is it you can only find eternal life in Him?

Well, that's exactly what the Lord Himself said! It's either true, and He is the Lord; or He is a liar or a lunatic who should not be trusted.

Christianity may be exclusive... But it's also very inclusive. All men everywhere, throughout all human history, can be saved by grace through faith in the promised Savior.

You're asked to compromise in other, subtler ways. Over the last twenty or so years, secular psychology has invaded the Church. The philosophies of godless and god-hating men have been integrated with biblical counseling – to the detriment of people who need genuine help.

There are other compromises - like moral compromises as our society becomes more and more immoral or amoral. Just know that compromise is a fierce adversary that will constantly harass you.

- being changed to bring change -
So is discouragement:

[Ezra 4:4](#) Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building,

We mentioned discouragement last week. We need to mention it more often. I think it is one of the most potent weapons that can be leveled against a believer. Discouragement makes you much more susceptible to other sins.

There's another adversary in verse four. It says [they troubled them in building](#). The words mean that they *frightened* them; or, literally, they *terrorized* them.

You have a spiritual fear factor, and the devil knows what it is. He will manipulate people and circumstances to tap into your fear factor, trying to terrorize you. So you are made afraid that something will happen; or you will lose something or someone; if you press forward in your walk with God.

Counselors are your adversary:

[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.

This probably means that they bribed corrupt Persian officials to hinder their progress. Perhaps they were building inspectors; or in some other position to cause delays in the construction. It was their bribed [counsel](#) that the returnees were going about things in the wrong way.

The world in which you live as a Christian is hostile to the Gospel. Having rejected God and His Word, it is full of other counsel. Philosophy... Psychology... Sociology... All those ologies are against the simple truth that you are a sinner and Jesus is the Savior. Science, which ought to be neutral, has instead embraced the disproven theory of evolution.

On a more day-to-day level, the airwaves are full of bad counsel that denies the Lord who bought you in favor of some new theory about human behavior.

Before we id your next adversary, I need to explain what's going on in the next section of verses. Verses six through twenty-three are not in chronological order with verses one through five. They are like a parentheses or a footnote inserted inbetween verses five and twenty-four. The author has been describing their current trouble while Cyrus was king of Persia. But in this parenthesis you will read about the successors of Cyrus – Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes, and Darius. These verses cover the whole period of time that is described in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

Why give the whole story of their troubles? Because there were additional adversaries they faced, and he wanted to list them all at

once. While he was on the subject. After all, he was writing a spiritual history, not just a literal one.

The next adversary is accusations. Look at verses six, seven, and eight:

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.

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

Aramaic was the universal language everyone spoke in order to communicate. The point is that letters were written to both of Cyrus' successor accusing the returnees of many terrible things.

Rather than re-reading the entire section, let me just highlight some of the accusations:

Verse 12 - **the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem, and are building the rebellious and evil city...**

Verse 15 - **...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.**

The devil is labeled the **accuser of the brethren**. One of the things he likes most is to accuse believers – of past sins, especially; but he'll accuse you of your present shortcomings as well.

We get too crippled by the accusations of others. We get wounded; we don't want to be treated that way; we think we're being misunderstood. We need to man-up (as they say) and press forward through all the accusations.

There was one other adversary at work here, not mentioned directly. Jews who read this summary of their history would think of it, and so should we.

You see it in the prophecy of Haggai who wrote this to these people after their work had ceased for nearly sixteen years.

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 1:8 "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.

The adversary Haggai identified is comfort. The Jews had grown comfortable. They lived in paneled houses and were pursuing the American dream in Middle-Eastern style. Faced with all the other adversaries, they gave in to them and pursued their own comfort.

Call it materialism, or worldliness... We can get to a point where we don't want to sacrifice our comfort in order to make spiritual progress. In our culture, it may be the most fierce of all these adversaries.

There you have it. A series of foes sought to harass them. Sadly, their adversaries were successful. Which leads us to ask,

#2 Have Your Adversaries Halted You From Your Building?

(v17-24)

We're looking at events that span some six decades. Verse one through five are about opposition to rebuilding the Temple. Beginning with verse six, the Temple had already been rebuilt. King Artaxerxes letter (beginning in verse seventeen) caused them to halt the building of the city and its walls. Let's read it with that in mind.

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?

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.

You should read verses one through five, then verse twenty-four, for the proper chronological order.

Why is this important? It's important because when they halted work on the Temple, it was not as a result of any official decree. It was because they caved-in to their adversaries.

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 first word of verse twenty-four, *thus*, could be translated *then*. When? *Right after verse five!*

The work of rebuilding the Temple ceased for sixteen years – until Haggai (and also Zechariah) stirred them up to continue. It's a warning to us to not halt building our lives with the Lord.

You and I will remain building projects until we go to be with the Lord either through physical death or the Rapture. We are always in an unfinished state; but we ought to be building with the Lord, making spiritual progress day-by-day.

Adversaries like the ones we've discovered and discussed will constantly harass us. But they need not halt us.

Applying God's Word

As long as I've lived in Hanford, there have been unfinished houses. They get started; but something happens along the way and they sit unfinished – sometimes for years. The latest one I've been following is on the Northeast corner of Oaks and Earl Way. We call it the Brick

Mystery House, because it's not just mostly brick, but it's done in a weird, wavy, uneven design. It's been sitting there unfinished for years. Every now and then, something will happen. But it's totally random.

Although I am always in progress as the Lord's building, I don't want my progress to be random. I don't want to be sitting around for lengthy periods with little or no work going on.

The first step towards rebuilding if you've been halted is to identify your adversaries; and we've done just that.

It's also the only step – because once you identify your adversaries, you realize they have already been defeated by Jesus.



