

Chapter 7: The War is Real!

(Ezra 3:10-13, 4:4:1-5, 25, 5:1, 4:6-24)

We have reached the point in our study of the book of Ezra in which we address an important realization. Satan is real. He is described in the Scriptures as a serpent, adversary, the devil, the evil one, etc. Ultimately, we must realize that he is a believer's adversary - our enemy. He has demons, angels who fell with him, who are working against us as well. (Revelation 12:9). He is defeated, but only by Christ - not us! This needs to not only be head knowledge, but heart knowledge. And we see him appear in the story of Ezra in three different ways - through discouragement; through infiltration; through force.

It starts with Discouragement (Ezra 3:10-13)

The Israelites were motivated and feeling the full backing of God. They knew they were well on their way towards God's will in having His temple rebuilt in the holy city of Jerusalem. They were secure in their mission; investing in their God's temple, and in one accord propelled to complete the project at hand. The foundation of the temple was complete. But wait, there were opposite feelings about the results. You mean that each person had an idea as to what the temple should look like!? Seems like it. The elders, ones who were old enough to remember the old temple, had an idea of rebuilding the temple exactly the way it was in Solomon's time. The younger ones, the ones who didn't even lay eyes on the old temple, were overjoyed with their progress. A loud noise was emerging from the midst of the holy city. A loud noise mixed with weeping and rejoicing. So much noise was going up for opposite reasons that others from afar could hear it. What just happened? Did they accomplish their task? Did they fail their task? This is where we have the first realization of the adversary's presence. That old serpent isn't striking yet; just slithering around the people and sizing up his prey.

When it comes to defeating the motivation of a group, the best way to do it is to incite discouragement. We see the serpent begins to do so in Ezra 3:10-13. The elders remember the grandeur of Solomon's Temple. In comparison to what was before their eyes, to say the least, they were disappointed. So much so, that the Scriptures say they wept aloud - openly showing their grieving - and it wasn't a subtle groan either, we are talking about a full fledged wailing.

There are some of us, in our flesh, who tend to look back and desire the things of the past which we remember as being good. However, we seem to forget the struggle that came mixed in around those good things. Then, there are some, who look back and only recall struggles. They tend to forget the good. Why do we have different reactions? I contribute this to our focus. When we choose to focus on good, then good expounds exponentially. However, when we choose to focus on the bad, then bad expounds exponentially. This is what determines our reactions to God's work. We have to remember at all times that God does not work on our time schedule. I believe this is one of Satan's major ways of discouraging us - things not happening the way we think they should and how we think they should. The way we battle this tactic of Satan is how we battle all His tactics and that is to apply the truth of God's Word.

Remember that God is about refreshing and making anew. He doesn't want to take us backwards. This is why it is important we remember that when we considered returning earlier in our study, we were looking at returning to God, not to our old ways. God promises believers in His Scriptures that He doesn't go backwards but forwards.

"I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint." Jeremiah 31:25

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

2 Corinthians 5:17

"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Isaiah 43:18-10

God tells us to look at what He is doing - not backwards at what has been. Good or bad in the past should never be looked at as a substitute for what God is doing at the present time. We can truly get discouraged and even ignore what God is doing if we look backwards and

. . . long for the good of that time.

. . . fear return of struggles of that time.

So be alert to the enemy's tactic here and realized that when God has called us to His “anew,” our enemy will begin to defeat the progress with discouragement.

Infiltration (Ezra 4:1-5, 25, 5:1)

When discouragement from within doesn't work, then the enemy works on infiltration. Through discouragement he has sized up his prey. Now it is time to start curling up and stabilizing himself so he can strike. What does he know he has to do? Infiltrate his enemy - God's people. Satan's choice weapon for infiltration is manipulation. He comes with a sweet tongue that seems like it is on your side. This sly speech is a technique of manipulation to get you to believe he is on your side. However, the whole time he is just getting himself positioned to strike.

This is the next appearance we have of the enemy in Ezra 4:1-3. There were those who wanted to join in the building. Their speech wasn't displaying aggression. They looked like they wanted to be neighborly. They even expressed how they sought after God and have sacrificed to Him. Why was it a bad thing for them to join? Stop right now and read Ezra 4:1 again . . . they were adversaries/enemies of Judah and Benjamin. These individuals were descendants from the intermarriages of Israelites and foreigners who were transplanted by the Assyrians to Samaria by King Esarhaddon. This procedure by the Assyrians suppressed oneness of spirit and created a union of different or opposing principles and practices in religions. Basically it was a way of suppressing people from following after any religion particularly and looking to them, the Assyrians, as the leader to solve all their problems. It was an attempt to water down the effect of the people and their religion. Zerubbabel and Jeshua knew this was against God's Word which was told to their ancestors to follow before they even conquered the Promised Land.

“The Lord your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess.

But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, “How do these nations serve their gods?

We will do the same.” You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.”

Deuteronomy 12:29-32

God the Father's Word directs clearly first with this directive going into the Promised Land initially and here in Ezra it is acted upon with the rebuild of the temple, which was a statement to the people of taking back their land. God was saying, don't let the individuals of the land infiltrate. By doing so, it is allowing a powerful influence. An influence that will drive you to worship what they worship and practice detestable things. We will look more at this in Chapter 8 when we talk about Right Sacrifices, but this is what plagues us today. We have allowed the infiltration of the enemy and now we are shocked when he strikes. However, we shouldn't be.

This act of not allowing the people to join them was met with strong determination. Basically, the people didn't get their way. They wanted to be a part of the build. And since they couldn't be a part of it, then they would stop it all together. Satan was using their desires of the flesh to spark turmoil. So an outright campaign arose. Letters were sent to the kings of the land and officials were paid to work against the people of God. How does this technique of wanting

to join efforts go so quickly to being an outright enemy? What fuels it? The sin that comes directly from the depths of hell itself - pride. And who is better to hold the banner for pride up than Satan himself, the father of pride. However, the stage must be set for pride to enter the scene. Satan knew how to set the stage: begin with rumbling from the people; continue the rumbling and instill fear. If you can't discourage from within, then discourage from without - incite fear.

Looking at the Scriptures, you will see that I skipped Ezra 4:6-24. The reason is these verses do not fall into chronological order until after Ezra 5:2 - 6:22. We see this by following the reigns of the Persian Kings. King Cyrus II "the Great" was the one that captured Babylon and the one that set forth the decree freeing God's people to return to rebuild the temple. His son, Cambyses II (named after his grandfather Cambyses I) succeeded him. Darius I was the son of Cambyses II and succeeded him as King over Persia. So we see in Ezra 4:5 that these kings had to put up with the constant trouble of being petitioned to stop the work of the temple rebuild. The letters that went back and forth during those times are recorded in Ezra 5:2-6:22. Many attempts were made and trouble was set forth to stop the work of rebuilding the temple. We see in Ezra 4:24 that these attempts were successful for a time because the work did stop during the last years of Cyrus's reign until the time of Darius. However, this was not because of the decree of Artaxerxes I. He was not in power yet. It was because of full discouragement at every angle and constant battle to do what their Lord had called them to do that the people stopped working. It is at this time the Lord sends His prophets Haggai and Zechariah. And since we will be looking at them more in depth in the next chapter, let's just leave it for now that they were sent to show the people they needed to get back to the work of the Lord. And that they did, because in 520 BC during the reign of Darius I, Zerubbabel resumes work. Along with it came an attempt to stop it again and a letter was sent to King Darius (Ezra 5:8-17), which received the response of a decree. In Ezra 6, we see that decree not only supports the temple's work to continue, but finances it as well. The work continues and finally the temple is completed and dedicated during the reign of King Darius in 515 BC.

Forced to Stop (Ezra 4:6-24)

God's people won that battle, but the enemy doesn't give up. Not happy that he lost the battle, he turns his aim toward stopping the rebuild of the wall and the holy city all together. This started by setting the stage through creating trouble. Our enemy is the father of chaos and that is where he thrives. So when he is given an opportunity to bring chaos into someone's life, he does so. Who better to give him an opportunity to use them than a pagan nation, ruled by a king who was so self-absorbed with pride you can prick to extremes with a wife not coming to expose herself when he commanded (Esther 1). Yep, the well known king that Esther was forced to marry - King Xerxes, known as Ahasuerus in Hebrew. We can see from the book of Esther that his reign was troubled and undistinguished. In addition, his reign was marked by internal unrest because of his failed attempt to invade Greece in 480 BC. This was a great time for Satan to create uneasiness in the reign of the king and breed it into the son who was to succeed him, Artaxerxes.

Throughout Artaxerxes long reign from 465 BC to 424 BC, he was faced with rebellions, notably in Egypt and Cyprus. The Persian Empire diminished under his rule and it was less impressive than it had been at its peak, under King Darius. All of this set the stage and a letter coming to King Artaxerxes from local opponents to God's people was just what he needed to flex his muscles. Artaxerxes could have consulted the histories and found King Cyrus' and King Darius' decrees of support and wisely continued that support himself. However, the stage for pride's breeding was set; and, thus, he instead saw that Jerusalem had a reputation of being rebellious and had no desire for more rebellion. Therefore, he issued an official decree to stop work at all cost. (Ezra 4:9-23). Before, the temple was stopped from being rebuilt by discouragement. That attempt was met with God strengthening His people through motivation from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Now, the temple was rebuilt, but the city was under full attack

and forced to stop by arms. Strike! The enemy has made his bite and infiltrated his venom. He is marking a battle won. However, our God isn't intimidated and we shouldn't be either, for we will see in Ezra 7 that God sends His servant Ezra and along with him comes God's wisdom of His Word.

Realize the Spiritual Warfare

There is one thing Satan doesn't want you to realize and that is believers are in a spiritual war with him and his demons. This knowledge alone will make you realize what you are up against and it will lead you, as a believer, into realizing how you can win the battles in your life. Jesus wants us to recognize this warfare because it helps us to see how we need Him and we cannot fight on our own. In our flesh we cannot fight Satan, but through the Spirit, which is given to us through accepting the blood sacrifice of Christ, we can overcome!

Dearly beloved, you are in this war because you are a believer. Satan doesn't worry about the actions or standing in the way of an unbeliever because they are already on his side. One hard fact for us to realize is that when one doesn't believe in Jesus Christ then they are not His and, therefore, are sons of the devil. An unbeliever cannot understand the language of Christ because they are unable to hear what He says. They belong to their father, the devil, and they desire what he desires. Jesus, through His Word, tells them the truth, but they do not believe Him. This alone shows they belong to the devil. A believer knows the voice of Jesus. He knows them and they follow Him. (see John 8:43-45; 10:27).

It's going to be a struggle! No - It's going to be war!

As we looked at the account of how the enemy attacked God's people when they were rebuilding the temple, did the Lord remind you of your own personal attacks from the enemy?

Discouragement . . . manipulation . . . deception . . . sweet tongue
. . . infiltration suggestions . . . forced to stop from our own fears.

These are just a few of the ways our enemy wars against us. As part of this war, we have to understand it is going to be more than a struggle. As a matter of fact, if you are on the right track and following God's Will, it is going to be outright war. Many of us as believers stand at a point in our lives where we aren't totally at the bottom of following God's standards, but we are a ways from living Christ-like. There is a long path to go before we can see God and His ways. Perseverance will have to become our advisor! Because we have lived in a society in which we are immersed in its ways, we have to embrace concepts Christ will give us that may be new to our own way of living.

This war isn't going to just be a struggle we overcome in our lives. It is war - spiritual war! And you can go ahead and settle this in your mind right now - Satan will turn his fiery darts towards you when you make the decision to turn and go up the slope towards God's standards instead of down the slope away from God. But don't pick up that serpent Satan and walk around with him any longer. While he gives you delusions to love that make you feel cozy as he curls up next to you, before you know it he turns into the python he really is and begins to suck the spiritual life out of you and your family. Scripture tells us that when we are saved the Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts to strengthen us because we belong to Him. (Romans 5:5, 8:9, Ephesians 3:16) Believers have the Holy Spirit guiding them. Satan, while he tries to get us off course with the battles, has already been defeated by Jesus - Remember this always! Jesus' death and resurrection did more than give you a way to spend eternity with Him in heaven. It gave you power! Power to live the life the Father has destined you to live through Christ Jesus (Romans 8:29). Jesus gave the believers His Holy Spirit to overcome. We can and will overcome the battle - the war - Satan wages against us if, and only if, we are led by the Holy Spirit into Christ-like character.

Deepening the Walk

The Israelites attack was from people, but directed by Satan, himself. Take a look at this account in Ezra.

First **Read Ezra 3:10-13; 4:1-5, 25, 5:1** and then go back to **Ezra 4:6-24**

What ways do you see the enemy, Satan, appearing to stop the work of God's people?

The Scriptures tell us specifically that we war not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil. Let's look closer at that Scripture.

Read Ephesians 6:10-20

What does Paul direct us to do right from the start? (v. 10)

What does he say we need to put on to be able to do this? (v. 11)

Why do we need to put this on? (v. 12)

Describe here the parts of the armor. How does each part relate to putting on Christ? (v.13-20)

I have had many conversations with believers who read Ephesians 6:10-20 and they know that it says we war not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. They can even repeat the verse to me, word for word. But then a situation will happen and I will say to them, "That is the enemy! He is attacking you!" and they will either look surprised at the thought or express many excuses as to why it is something other than the enemy. My heart sinks when I have such encounters because I know that they haven't taken God's truth in His Word to heart. They have only acknowledged it in their minds. We must take it to heart because we are continually on the battlefield.

Reflect Upon God's Desire:

Read Psalm 59. David wrote this Psalm when Saul had sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.

In what ways do you see David calling out to God for defense against the enemy? (v. 1-8)

David recognizes God desires to fight the battle and desires to do so. In what way did he express that God would deliver him from his enemy? (v. 7-17)

Write Psalm 59:16-17 on an index card and place it in a common place for your to remember God's desire to strengthen you through the battles.

Praise, Repent And Yield:

Lord, I **praise** You for . . .

I **repent** of . . .

I **yield** to You . . .