

Who Do We Obey? – Ezra 4-6

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Read Ezra 4:1-5

B. Conflict vs. Unity

1. One of the things skeptics & critics of Christianity love to point out is the large number of denominations & groups that comprise the Faith.
2. They ask, if we all claim to believe the Truth, why are there so many groups?
3. And why do we argue so vehemently?
4. In John 17 Jesus put a premium on unity among His followers; yet it seems that's been mostly ignored through the centuries.

C. "Die Heathen Scum!"

1. A couple years ago, _____ & his wife _____ were on a cruise of the Hawaiian Islands.
2. _____ loves to just stand at the rail of the highest observation deck & feel the wind on his face, smell the scent of fresh ocean air.
3. That deck on one of those cruise ships is *high*, several stories over the pool & sun deck.
4. One day, as he was standing there under a clear blue sky, another passenger came to the rail and said, "What a day!" _____ said, "It sure is!"
5. They struck up a conversation. After chit-chat about what they did for a living they realized they both lived in _____.
6. Then they realized they were both Christians. _____ asked the other guy what *kind* of Christian he was. He said he was a Protestant. _____ said, "Me too."
 - a. Then _____ asked, "What kind of Protestant?" The guy said, "Evangelical."
 - b. _____ said, "Me too? Are you charismatic; do you believe in the gifts of the Spirit?"
 - c. The guy said, "Yes, although I believe all things should be done decently and in order as Paul says in 1 Cor., 14."
 - d. _____ said, "Absolutely! Wow, this is amazing. What's your position on the timing of the Rapture; is it Pre-, mid-, or post-trib?"
 - e. The man said, "Pre-trib—I just can't see the other positions supported by Scripture."
 - f. _____ said, "Exactly! Well, where do you go to church?"
 - g. The other man said, "Calvary Chapel."
 - h. _____ replied, "You're kidding! I go to CC. Which one—Ventura, Camarillo, Thousand Oaks, Newbury Park, Fillmore, Simi Valley, or Oxnard?"
 - i. He said, "Oxnard."
 - j. _____ said, "Me too! I've been going for 7 years, how long have you been there?"
 - k. The guy replied, "A little over 6 years!"
 - l. _____ was amazed, then wondered why he didn't recognize the guy & asked, "Which service do you go to?"

- m. The guy said, “The 3rd service, how about you?”
 - n. A scowl came over _____’s face & he said, “The first service! Die you heathen scum!” And pushed the guy over the rail. [change for each service]
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D. Today

1. Many times the things we allow to divide us are silly & ought not interfere with our love for & acceptance of one another.
 2. But there *are* times when division is *necessary*; when we must maintain our distance.
 3. When others hold beliefs contrary to the essentials of our Faith we simply can’t be in agreement with them.
 4. We see that & a whole lot more in our study today.
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5. Sunday’s message usually centers on a few verses from the larger passage we’re looking at in our mid-week study.
 6. This morning, we’re going to do a survey of 3 chapters, Ezra 4-6.
 7. We begin with what we just read . . .

II. TEXT

A. 4:1-5

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, 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.”

1. Ch. 3 ends with the foundation of the temple being laid in the same place Solomon’s glorious temple stood.
 - a. That temple was destroyed by the Babylonians 50 years before.
 - b. But as we saw last Sunday, the Persian king Cyrus granted permission for the exiled Jews to return & rebuild Jerusalem & the temple.
 2. As soon as they’d commenced the work, the Samaritans who lived to the north asked if they could help.
 3. But Ezra clues us in to the fact they didn’t really want to assist – they wanted to oppose; they were *adversaries* of God’s people.
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4. Just who were the Samaritans? They tell us here in v. 2.
 - a. They were placed in the land by the Assyrians over 200 years before.
 - b. 2 Kings 17 gives us the details.
 - 1) When the Assyrians defeated the northern tribes of Israel, they deported & scattered them throughout their empire.
 - 2) Then they transplanted people from Babylon & Syria into the land of Israel.
 - 3) Life was tough, with some odd things happening that moved them to conclude they were being judged by the God of Israel.
 - 4) So they asked the Assyrians for some Jewish priests to be returned to teach them *how* to worship God.
 - 5) Priests were brought who taught them the basics about the Lord.

- 6) These transplanted people didn't turn **from** their gods **TO** the Lord, they just **added** some ideas about Him **to** the worship of their idols.
- 7) A couple times in 2 Kings 17 it says **they feared the Lord but worshipped their gods.**
5. These people, called the "Samaritans" provide a great picture of those who claim to believe in God, but that belief makes no real difference **to how they live.**
- There's all kinds of poll data that says the % of those in the US who believe in God is high, over 80% according to several.
 - But when the questions zero in on specific beliefs & practices, it turns out a much smaller number are **consistent** with what **God says.**
 - Many who claim to believe in God actually follow the values & priorities of popular culture for the living of their lives.
 - They're modern Samaritans.
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6. These guys came to the leaders of the Jews who'd returned from exile & where rebuilding the temple & asked to assist. But they had **no desire** to be a help.
7. **Prior** to the Jews' return, the Samaritans had exercised control over this area & didn't want to lose their influence there.
8. So they offered help but **really wanted control.** They thought the best way to do so was by appearing benevolent.
9. The Jewish leaders were hip to their plan & wisely refused.
- 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."**
10. The Jewish leaders weren't just being mean toward the Samaritans.
- They knew their ulterior motives.
 - The rebuilding of the temple was a holy enterprise that had to be constructed by careful means.
11. The Samaritans' true colors become clear in what happens next.
- ⁴ Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building, 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.**
12. There are some great lessons to learn from all this about spiritual warfare that we'll look at more closely when we get to Nehemiah.
13. For now, take note **how** the enemy resisted what God was doing in & through His people.
- First, he tried to get them off track by **offering assistance** that would have moved them away from **complete dependence on God alone.**
 - The Samaritans had personnel & resources that would have helped in getting the project done.
 - But the Samaritans would have laid claim to the temple & turned it to the worship of their own gods.
 - What's begun by the Spirit cannot be assisted or completed by the flesh.
 - More than once in the history of God's people, genuine revival has been

- killed by those who think to “help” it by organizing & packaging it.
- b. Second, when the enemy’s “assistance” was rejected he moved to **discourage** the people of God.
 - 1) Look at the word = **Dis-courage**; to remove courage.
 - 2) The Jews began the work with courage because their eyes & hearts were fixed on God.
 - 3) But after a while, the daily challenge of survival in a hard land with a huge task began to intrude on their vision.
 - 4) Eventually, their view of God was **eclipsed** by the immensity of the undertaking, & courage fled.
 - 5) Just like Peter when he walked on the water. As long as his eyes were fixed on Jesus, he had courage to do what seemed impossible.
 - 6) But the moment he took his eyes off the God of the Impossible & put them on his circumstances, courage fled & he sank.
 - 7) That’s what the enemy does with us – he tries to get our eyes off God & onto our circumstances.
 - c. Third, the enemy **troubled** them as they worked.
 - 1) The Samaritans interfered with the supplies & processes needed to rebuild.
 - 2) They tried to make the project so difficult that the Jews would quit.
 - 3) But they didn’t quit; they kept working & eventually the temple was rebuilt.
 - d. Fourth, the enemy sent a **steady stream of clever people** who used all kinds of arguments on why the temple **ought not** be built.
 - 1) This is one of the most difficult forms of opposition the devil uses.
 - 2) If you listen to the nay-sayers, they often seem to present a sound case for why the way of God isn’t practical or has changed, so that what used to be true is different now.
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B. Letters

1. In vs. 6-16 we read of a couple letters the Samaritans sent the Persian kings, claiming the Jews were rebuilding Jerusalem as a fortress so they could stage a rebellion.
2. In vs. 17-24 the Persians replied & commanded that the rebuilding be immediately halted.
3. The Samaritans were clever in their appeal & use of current events in scaring the Persian kings.
 - a. You see, this was at a time when things were heating up on the western frontier with the Greeks.
 - b. Also, several times in their letter, the Samaritans refer to themselves as loyal subjects “beyond the River” meaning the Euphrates.
 - 1) They used this phrase, “Beyond the River” because there was another group “beyond the River” that had used Persians troubles in the West as an opportunity to rebel.
 - 2) Putting the rebellion down had cost the Persians valuable assets that could have been used against the Greeks.
 - 3) So the Samaritans remind the Persians of their loyalty & insinuate if the

Persians don't do what they want, *they too* may rebel at a time when the Persians need every available soldier for dealing with the Greek threat.

4. Their ploy worked, & a halt was called to the rebuilding of the temple.
5. That brings us to Ch. 5.

C. 5:1-2

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. 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.

1. We have the Books of both Haggai & Zechariah & know what they prophesied.
 2. Haggai brought a *rebuke* while Zechariah encouraged with a *promise*.
 3. Haggai showed them where they'd gotten off track & Zechariah showed them how to get back on it.
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D. Inquiry

1. No sooner had work on the temple begun anew than Persian officials showed up & asked who'd given permission for the work to recommence.
2. The Jewish leaders gave a full accounting of everything that had happened, going all the way back to their *original mandate* by Cyrus.
3. The Persian officials then sent a letter to the Persian king asking for an investigation into the claims of the Jews.
4. Sure enough, when the investigation was made into the royal records, they realized Cyrus *had* given orders for the rebuilding of the temple.
5. Even more, he'd assigned resources to the project; materials the Samaritans had to ante up!
6. So, not only was their opposition thwarted,
 - a. But all the trouble they'd caused ended up being turned into blessing for the people of God.
 - b. The Samaritans had to *truly help* by providing supplies for the temple's construction!
7. God really does cause all things to work together for good for His people.

III. CONCLUSION

A. 6:14

1. After Ezra recounts the reply of the Persian king to his officials, instructing them to not only permit the Jews to rebuild but to make sure they were getting the supplies they needed – he writes this –

¹⁴ So the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

B. Who Do We Obey?

1. There are several lessons we could glean from these chapters but the one I

- want to consider with you today is *the response* of the people to Haggai & Zechariah.
2. You see, the Jews did right thing in rebuffing the Samaritans.
 3. They got to work in rebuilding the temple but when they had it only part-way built, they stopped.
 4. They halted because word came from the **government** to stop.
 5. Then 2 prophets showed up & in said, “Why have you stopped?”
 - a. “The **king** told us to.”
 - b. “Yeah, but **God** told you to rebuild.”
 - c. “But the **king** told us to halt & the Samaritans threatened that if we disobey they’ll harm us.”
 - d. “Who should you listen to – the king or God?
Who should you fear – Samaritans or the Lord?”
 6. Phrased this way, the Jewish leaders realized they’d been fooled by their enemy & got back to work.
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7. Here’s the point – As we who follow Christ live in a fallen world that’s at odds with God, there are going to be times when obeying the Lord means disobeying man.
 8. Sometimes following Christ means **not** following society’s rules or even keeping the civil law.
 9. In Acts 4 & 5 – the Apostles Peter & John were arrested for preaching the Gospel.
 - a. They were hauled before the Jewish high council & commanded **not** to preach in Jesus name, then thrown into jail.
 - b. An angel came & busted them out, telling them to go back into the temple the next morning & keep preaching.
 - c. The council was furious & once again grabbed them & demanded they stop preaching in Jesus’ name.
 - d. Peter respectfully looked them in the eye & humbly but boldly replied, “You tell us, should we obey God or man?”
 10. So, I ask you – Who do we obey – God or man? God or government?
 11. During the days when the last of the NT books were being written by Paul, Peter & John, the Romans began a new policy of requiring the subjects of the Empire to make an oath of loyalty.
 12. Every few years, each adult male had to appear before a Roman official, pick up a little pinch of incense, drop it on some hot coals & say, “Caesar is Lord” meaning – Caesar is god.
 - a. This was no problem for pagans who believed in many gods. Adding one more to the list was no big deal.
 - b. But Christians simply could **not** say it because for many years they’d uttered another oath of loyalty – “**Jesus** is Lord.”
 - c. To attribute lordship to Caesar was a blasphemy they would never allow cross their lips.
 - d. Though Christians were the best citizens in the Empire had, because they refused the loyalty oath to Caesar, they were rounded up & used as sport in the games held in the theaters, amphitheaters & coliseums; fed to wild

- beasts while the crowds cheered.
13. But as they huddled in the center of those arenas, some kneeling, others standing, the beasts circling ready to pounce, the Christians didn't face their imminent death with terror.
 - a. They didn't scream outrage at the spectators who came to watch.
 - b. They didn't hurl insults at the officials who condemned them.
 - c. They lifted their faces, eyes, & hands to heaven & sang praises to the One who now rose from His throne to welcome them home, just as He had for the first martyr – Stephen.
 14. It was the courage & dignity of those tens of thousands of Christians who died that way all over the empire that eventually caused those arenas to empty & games to end
 - a. The spectators were convicted of their spiritual emptiness by the example of the martyrs.
 - b. They realized *they* could not die with that kind of courage & so many of them came to faith in Christ.
 - c. Eventually, the Roman Emperor himself became a Christian – & the loyalty oath was dropped.

 15. As we look to the Word of God says about the end times, we see that the world will grow increasingly hostile toward God & His people.
 16. If you follow the news, it's not difficult to see the direction things are going in our nation.
 17. Churches have enjoyed a lot of protection under the law.
 - a. I suspect that will change soon.
 - b. I don't think it will be long before the charge of hate crimes will replace the rights of free speech.
 - c. The threat of losing our tax-exempt status will be used in an attempt to get us to comply with a godless agenda.
 - d. Old Rome is being revived.
 18. Who will we obey?
 19. As for me, my house, & my church – we will follow & serve the Lord Jesus.