

“We Alone Will Build to the LORD”

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Text: Ezra 4:1-24; Revelation 12:1-12

We have all heard stories in the news about someone who desires to build a massive home, gets all of the necessary permits, and the starts construction. The neighbors, who have smiled and waved everyday for years, seem to be perfectly okay with the project. They never said a word when the matter came before the city council and a public hearing. But once the building got underway and it became apparent that the home’s second story would block the neighbor’s view, suddenly a lawsuit is filed, an injunction issued, and building stops, until months or even years later when the matter is finally resolved. We see a similar episode in our text, as the Israelites, who have the permission and blessing of the Persian king to rebuild their temple, now discover that their neighbors to the north—who even offer to help the Israelites with the work—are actually conspiring to stop the rebuilding project dead in its tracks. Their efforts reach all the way to the Persian royal court and Ezra’s initial reports of progress give way, instead, to an apparent end to efforts to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple.

As we continue our series on the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, we move into Ezra 4, where we learn that the initial progress in rebuilding the temple, about which we read last time, has now come to a sudden and unforeseen halt. Israel’s adversaries lobby for a work stoppage and succeed. Last time, we read in chapter 3 of the how the altar was rebuilt at the temple site, and the daily sacrifices were re-instituted. Under the leadership of Jeshua and Zerubbabel, once again the Israelites celebrate their historic feasts according to the law of Moses. These feasts played a significant role in Israel’s history and, in part, established their identity as the people of YHWH.

Just as Israel’s history took an unexpected turn when the Israelites were set free from their Babylonian captivity by Cyrus in 538 BC, then returned home and began the work of rebuilding their city and their temple, Israel’s circumstances change unexpected yet again. The work on the temple comes a grinding halt. In fact, everything of which we read from here on in both books of Ezra and Nehemiah will be framed in terms of an eighty year conflict instigated by Israel’s neighbors, lasting until Ezra himself appears on the scene in 458.¹ In chapter 4:1-5, 24, Ezra informs us that effort to rebuild the city and the temple will face strong opposition until the temple is finally completed about 516 BC. In verses 6-23, Ezra jumps ahead in time to give background to the reader regarding the numerous complaints about Israel which came before the Persian court, even after the temple was completed. Motivated by unbelief, and characterized by political intrigue among the local population and the Persian kings, the entire account of the struggle to rebuild the temple and the city—especially the city’s walls—must be seen in light of the backdrop of Satan’s continual efforts to thwart the purposes of God as depicted as a war in heaven in Revelation 12:1-12, our New Testament lesson.

In the prophecy of Zechariah (chapter 3:1-10), given during the time the temple was being rebuilt, we read of Satan’s on-going efforts to bring the failures of Joshua (Jeshua), the high priest, to the Lord’s attention in the heavenly court. As recounted in Zechariah’s heavenly vision, Joshua’s priestly garments were stripped from him, and he was given spotless new priestly clothing by the Lord’s angel. Last time,

¹ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 48.