

## Ezra Chapters 3-4 John Karmelich

1. Let me start with my title: "The joys and pitfalls of doing something for God". As the title implies, using our lives to make a difference for God isn't always a "bed of roses". Usually on Day 1 we're all excited to take on a project and get rolling. By day 50, we're thinking, "Are we done yet?" If that's not hard enough, knowing that using our lives to make a difference for God means that we must deal with opposition that will occur. That describes these two chapters in a nutshell!
  - a) The longer version is the first two chapters focused on the Israelites as they packed up to leave where they lived and headed back to the land of Israel. That land is now part of the Persian Empire. So "starting over" is still subject to other leaders let alone other problems to be dealt with. Think about doing missionary work: One is accountable to leaders and I am very aware that every missionary situation requires dealing with problems that were not expected when the journey was planned. In other words, "Welcome to life!"
  - b) Anyway, that journey for the Israelites was 4-6 months on foot or the backs of animals. It's now "all that time later" as this chapter opens up with the Israelites there in the land. The big goal is to rebuild the temple. Step 1 is the sacrificial alter. The Israelites built it on the exact same spot where the old one stood. Obviously there was enough evidence of where it stood, plus some older people making the trip (as we'll read about later) remembered the spot well.
  - c) One of the things that fascinated me is, "What's so important about the same spot?" Why was it necessary for God's temple to be rebuilt on the exact spot where the old one was? I know there's the aspect of "tradition". Still God is everywhere. God told Solomon to build a temple, but didn't specify a spot. It was his father King David who picked that location. Anyway, "tradition started" and the next temple was to be built there. That leads me back to the question, "Why that particular spot?" After all in David's time, the tabernacle stood in different locations. What I figure is "This is the spot God left from" (See Ezekiel 10). So maybe it was important for the Israelites to think, "We're seeking God, maybe we should go to where He last was". Obviously God is everywhere and can meet us anywhere. After all He spoke to Ezekiel and Daniel while they were in Babylon. I think it's simply a matter of thinking, "We're back, let's do our best to start off, exactly where we left off!"
    - i) Gee John, that's nice. I should care because? There will be times in our lives when we feel like God's left us. To me those are times of testing. What may help when it occurs to "return" to how we sought Him before. It may work or may not. What it is God cares about is our effort to seek Him, even when His presence isn't sensed.
2. At this point it may help to summarize these two chapters.
  - a) The story doesn't start when that first group of Israelites first arrived. This chapter starts on the 7th month of the Jewish calendar that's in the fall. The Mosaic law requires all those Jewish people living in Israel to gather in Jerusalem three times per year. This is one of the three times. Why this date? Don't know, maybe it's the nearest one to when they arrived.
  - b) Anyway, the command of the Persian Emperor was to rebuild the temple. So this was the first gathering to do so. Where does one start? With a sacrificial altar. The law requires a bunch of sacrifices for those fall festivals (think of it as three holidays running together).
  - c) Therefore the civil leader we read about in the last lesson (Zerubbabel the civil leader and Jeshua the religious leader), "got the ball rolling".
  - d) The altar was built on the same spot as the old one, and there must have been evidence of where that was and construction began. Since they were there to rebuild the temple, recall that the Israelites left the Persian Empire with a bunch of valuable things. They took some of that to "hire the locals" to build. For example, north of Israel is Lebanon, they had forest areas with good trees to be cut down as building materials. Bottom line, construction was under way and the project was rolling.

- e) The rest of chapter 3 is essentially comments on the construction project. The priests then went to work to do their sacrificial rituals. Even the singers who made the trip (as I stated in the last lesson) got into the act and the celebration began.
  - f) Among those who made the trip were older men who'd seen the first temple. As I stated, it is estimated that the original temple built by Solomon would have cost several billion in today's money. So when some of the men saw this much smaller temple, they wept aloud as if to say, "It's nothing like the last one". So you know when Herod came on the scene a few hundred years later, he expanded the temple and made it "shine". That was how that temple looked in Jesus day. If you don't know the Romans destroyed that one in 70AD.
3. That leads us to Chapter 4. Time for the bad news! The short version is some of the locals who were living there when the Jewish people returned didn't appreciate the building project. So they worked to stop it. In fact they wrote to the Emperor (who was a different one than Cyrus by that time) who replied in effect, "Stop the construction now. The Israelites have a history of rebellion and I won't allow this". That's chapter 4 in a paragraph.
- a) Stop and think about that for a second. It's not like they were painting "Down with Persia" signs everywhere. It's not like they were killing the local soldiers or tax collectors. All that these Israelites were doing was building a temple and yet that "ticked off" the locals to the point they complained up the chain of command to the Emperor.
  - b) Obviously, there's more to the story than just the rebellion. Ok John, hit us with the "why should we should care lecture": The underlying idea is whenever one uses their lives for God, one can expect spiritual resistance. Think about it this way: Satan knows the amount of time he has to rule on earth is limited. There will only be a specific number of people in heaven, not an infinite number. Therefore, there has to be a final number. What he cannot stand is efforts to make a difference for God and shorten the time that Satan will rule here.
  - c) To put it another way, Satan can't take away our salvation, but he'll find ways to harass us as to prevent other people to draw closer to God. It's been true all through history. When I first got into ministry work, I was warned that bad stuff will happen, when I'm giving my time to make a difference for Jesus. After decades in ministry, I promise, that is very true! I don't want to scare you away from making a difference for Jesus. It's just a warning that this "comes with the territory". I know when I'm truly making a difference as again, "stuff happens". I ask people to pray for this ministry so it will continue to make a difference for Jesus as I desire to draw people closer to Him. Am I perfect? Hardly! God uses imperfect people to make a difference for Him and that should be all our goals.
  - d) Gee John, nice lecture and we're happy for you. What does any of this have to do with the chapters at hand? The bad news is the harassment discouraged them. In fact it was many years later (in Chapter 6) when Ezra shows up and the temple isn't finished yet. A reason why God sent the prophets Hosea and Zechariah at that time was to encourage them as to "keep the ball rolling". The point is the temple wasn't built in a day. The Israelites had to deal with an order from the Emperor to stop and the locals fighting them to prevent them from completing that project. Did the locals realize they were "Satan inspired"? Of course not, they just didn't like these Israelites returning to where they lived and proclaiming the message of "We're here, you don't belong, deal with it". In fact the temple wasn't done in the lifespan of at least two separate Persian emperors just to give a rough time frame!
  - e) Anyway, Chapter 4 deals with spiritual resistance. The good news is this temple will be a finished product by Chapter 6. We're reading the part where life isn't going well. When such moments arise, we must remember God's still in charge. In spite of the obstacles, if He calls us to do something for Him, He'll make it possible on His timing to get it done. Therefore we should never fear the "stuff happens" moments of our lives as God will win in the end.
  - f) With that happy thought stated, yes it's time for the verse-by-verse commentary on these two chapters. Let's begin:

4. Chapter 3, Verse 1. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem.
- a) The first thing to grasp here is the time gap. The previous chapter focuses on all of those who made the trip. Obviously when they got to the land of Israel they probably said stuff like, "My family's from that town, so we'll settle there, etc". It also means all them still did live in tents for a good while until homes were rebuilt. It also meant that all the people on the caravan each in effect went their own way. However, despite being separate, they still remember they came to Israel with a purpose. It wasn't just to live there. It was to rebuild the temple that was torn down.
  - b) Time to explain "months" for a second. It's not like they add apps on their phone so they'd know the dates. It's not like they had paper calendars on the wall. The Jewish calendar is (to this date) based on a lunar calendar. In other words when there is no moon out, that is the beginning of a new month. Twelve lunar months is about 354 days. Later in history to catch up, a 13th month was added every so often to "even it out". Anyway, they knew the month by the weather and time of the year. OK enough calendar talk. The point is, God's ordained specific dates on that month for the Israelites to all gather together. This series of holidays includes "Yom Kippur", a holiday where the Israelites are to confess sins they've done. Then comes a weeklong festival where the Israelites are to live in booths. It means living in portable shelters. It's to recall how the Israelites wandered for 40 years and God preserved them through all of that. Anyway all of that was the "seventh month".
  - c) OK John, hit us with the "why should we care" part. We get the fact the Israelites want to preserve their traditions and gathered together. We as Christians don't do that other than church trips. The underlying point is God calls us to "work together" in order to make the type of difference for Him that He desires. Yes we each have gifts and we can get creative to find ways to make a difference for Him. At the same time, it's never to be a billion solo efforts for Jesus. My own ministry includes people who regularly pray for me as well as a person or two who helps with the technical aspect. My point is any effort that we'll make for Him is very rarely a 100% solo effort. These Israelites traveled with a building mission (to rebuild the temple). For them to do that, obviously they had to come to the spot where it would be located. Since it was "festival" time, time to get the ball rolling.
5. Verse 2: Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.
- a) If you read Chapter 2, you'd remember that Jeshua was the top priest who journeyed to Israel with the "group". Zerubbabel was the civil leader and the grandson of one of final Israelite kings. Bottom line, since everybody looked to these guys as the leaders and the purpose of the trip was to rebuild the temple, they led this construction project.
  - b) If you study "temple construction and purpose" (I.e. the second half Exodus and most of Leviticus), the temple was mainly used to sacrifice animals along with some other rituals at the temple, all designed to get our focus on God.
  - c) The point here is if one is going to start "somewhere" in the rebuilding process, it's logical to start with the sacrificial altar. Why? It's not for the BBQ! It's about "putting our money where our mouth is" so to speak. Sacrificing is about showing God that we trust Him with our lives and giving up some of what we own to prove it!
  - d) Keep in mind Leviticus spends a lot of space describing the ways sacrifices are to be done. It's for asking God for forgiveness on individual and group effort. It's also to show that we are serious about our commitment to Him. There were special offering rituals on holidays like the one's the Israelites were gathered for in these verses plus daily offerings to show their commitment to Him. Bottom line, the guys working the BBQ pit were always busy!
  - e) A final comment here. Notice that the author of the book considers Moses to be the author of the first five bible books. Jesus Himself stated Moses was the author of those five books!

6. Verse 3: Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices. <sup>4</sup> Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. <sup>5</sup> After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred feasts of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD. <sup>6</sup> On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid.
- a) Remember how I said there were a number of different types of offerings made on God's altar? Well, we got a bunch of them listed here. Verse 3 lists the "daily requirements". In Verse 5 we the specific ones associated with the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-44).
  - b) If one needed to know the time of the day, time of the month or time of the year, watching the sacrifices was the Israelites "calendar" so to speak. Bottom line is God requires a whole bunch of different sacrifices for different purposes. The underlying idea is about showing our loyalty to God and willing to give up our "stuff" to show that loyalty.
  - c) Time for the important question: Why does we Christians not do all this stuff? The short answer is Jesus is the fulfillment of all those sacrifices. We no longer have to do "stuff" for the forgiveness of sins. God has forgiven us of every sin we ever have or ever will commit in our lives. But isn't that a "free license to sin"? The issue for us Christians is that we are required to be a good witness for Him. Let me put it this way, a proper Christian response to the question of can the Christian, smoke drink and do drugs? The answer we can do all of those things as much as we want. But how much do we want to as a witness for Him?
  - d) Let me ask the related question: Why don't religious Jewish people still sacrifice all those animals? Even if there's no temple, why not at a local synagogue? They'll say it cannot be done until "The" temple is rebuilt. So why isn't rebuilt today? Because the traditional spot is where a famous Muslim mosque stands today, so the "stand off" continues to this day.
  - e) All of this leads to the final comment on Verse 6. In effect it says, "Even though sacrifices have now been going on a regular basis, the actual temple construction hasn't started yet. So if the Israelites went back to the land with the specific mission of rebuilding the temple why did it stop for a bit? Life can be that way. We can finish part of a great project as we can then think, "OK time to rest on our laurels" for a bit. The good news is the leaders did know what their mission was and said in effect, "OK everyone, nice sacrificial altar, let us get back to what we're called to do. To me, that's what an effective leader is all about. It's to say in effect, here's what we're called to do, here's the resources we have, let's pray for His blessing, for our boldness and get down to business!
7. Verse 7: Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.
- a) Bottom line is they got down to business. The temple was more than block construction. It required wood. Why? Probably to hang things like the curtain that separated the temple into two parts: A most holy part (where' the "Gold box" was) from the rest of it. The next step was to get wood. Israel's mostly desert. They had to import wood from a forest area north of Israel in Lebanon (that was also part of the Persian Empire). What's logical is they used some of the gold and silver they bought to "hire out" to get the wood needed for the temple construction.
  - b) To state the obvious, this was going to delay things a bit. It's one thing to build an altar on the same spot where the old one stood using stones and creating a grate. It's another thing all together to have supplies to build a temple. Those Israelites there had the manpower to do all of this but there had to be a delay to travel north, talk to the locals up there, agree to a price and get the construction materials ordered and delivered. The reason for all of this "Inside baseball" stuff is to show that it literally was done in a reasonable time of that day.

8. Verse 8: In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Jeshua son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work, appointing Levites twenty years of age and older to supervise the building of the house of the LORD.<sup>9</sup> Jeshua and his sons and brothers and Kadmiel and his sons (descendants of Hodaviah) and the sons of Henadad and their sons and brothers--all Levites--joined together in supervising those working on the house of God.
- a) We're now on Year 2, and almost done with Chapter 3 of this 10 chapter story. Here we read of the temple finally breaking ground. The leaders are emphasized here again. Did these head guys get their hands dirty doing the work? Verse 9 says they "supervised". I'll leave the rest to our imagination. The point is the work was getting done and their leaders made sure it was done "according to plan. By that time all the building materials had to be on site, as it's simply a logical assumption.
  - b) If I "gave a hoot" about Middle East history 2,500 years ago, I might care about all of this. I would like to know why all this is important. The underlying issue is about using our life to make a difference for God. Yes, somebody has to lead. The point is that God calls us to use our lives to make a difference for Him. It usually requires hard work as to make that difference. I've yet to meet one person in the ministry who doesn't work hard to make a difference. Even if you're not in the professional ministry, ask yourself, what do you want to be remembered for in life? How hard you worked just to earn a living or the difference you made for Jesus! OK, enough guilt for these verses, let's try the next bunch!
9. Verse 10: When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel.<sup>11</sup> With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: "He is good; his love to Israel endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.
- a) If you read Chapter 2, remember that there were a lot of singers who made the trip. Here it's time for them to "earn their wages" by honoring God with their gifts of singing and I'd assume playing musical instruments. I'm convinced He loves when we sing praises for all He's done for us. It dawned on me a long time ago, that when I get to heaven I'm going to have to be doing a lot of singing, so I might as well get used to it now, even if I don't have the greatest singing voice. To share another motto that I've had for years, "God heard me sing and said, "Get over there with the teachers!" I have a lot of respect for the musicians leading worship as they do here in these verses.
  - b) I'm sure the musicians "pulled their weight" on the temple foundation. I'm sure they said we're not just here to sing, but to help.
  - c) Notice the temple itself isn't finished. It's just the "floor" that's done. Just as they paused to praise God when the altar was done, they also said it is praise time now that this next step is done. It teaches that when we take on a big project, it's ok to pause every now and then to praise God for getting us through the next step! That's what we got here.
  - d) Now for the interesting part to finish the chapter!
10. Verse 12: But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.<sup>13</sup> No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.
- a) It's probably been about 50 years since the temple was destroyed. Some of the older ones in the group remembered what the old one was like. As I stated earlier, the temple from before was worth millions or billions and this was a "modest one". So those who've seen the old one wept in the sense of thinking, "You call this a temple?" They thought none of this was worthy of "the" God to build a temple that's not very grand. That's a good excuse to discuss quality building construction:

- b) I've always argued the "church" isn't a building but the people who worship God. In my life I've seen incredible and very simple buildings used to worship God.
  - c) So why mention the fact the locals heard the yelling be it "good" for the construction and a bunch of weeping for it not being as good as the last one? It's sort of like the expression of show business, "Any publicity is good publicity". The idea is if people are discussing you, then they're thinking about you. If the "locals" were aware of the Temple project it brings attention to that project. So does that mean we should call attention to what we are doing for God? No that's different. As we get into the next chapter (next verse), I'll explain what "dealing with the locals" deals with as it's the major topic of Chapter 4 and a big issue that is important to understand as we use our lives to make a difference for Jesus. Speaking of the next chapter:
11. Chapter 4, Verse 1: When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel,<sup>2</sup> they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."
- a) First question, who are these characters and why should I care? To understand, realize in the day the Israelites returned to the land it wasn't completely empty. The North part was taken over by the Assyrians, who got conquered by the Babylonians who were conquered by the Persians (to overly simplify it). Anyway when the Assyrians conquered that North Israel kingdom over 100 years prior to the south one (Jeremiah preached about), what did happen was the Assyrians put a mixed multitude there. The Assyrian philosophy was to capture and relocate people so they wouldn't rebel. Anyway, those who settled in what is called "Israel" (The old Northern Kingdom) became the Samaritans, (yes the same ones we read of in the Gospels). Because they were a mixed multitude they worshipped lots of the gods including the Israelite God "because they were parked there".
  - b) Notice in Verse 1 this group was called "The enemies". Why would Ezra call them that? I am willing to bet they were serious about helping to build the temple, after all this group wanted to "cover their bases" and make sure they worshipped everyone! The Israelites in the group that came back thought in effect, "That's why our nation was kicked out of here in the first place, because other gods were worshipped in the land." The lesson to us is for us to be careful who we pick to ask for help. We shouldn't be overly picky but still not let those be involved who could cause us harm if it's not their goal to serve God alone!
  - c) So if the Israelites needed help, why not be a witness to this group since they're there? I'd say the issue is about "knowing one's enemy". One can be a witness just by doing what it is God called us to do. One can be a witness by saying, "watch and learn". Bottom line it's safe to say, the Israelites turned down their offer as we'll see in the next verse.
12. Verse 3: But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us."
- a) You can "smell the diplomacy" with this answer. They essentially said, "The top guy of the empire told us and us alone to do this, and we don't want to get in trouble. Let us be!"
  - b) That alone is a great lesson in diplomacy and still being a good witness for God.
13. Verse 4: Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.<sup>5</sup> They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.
- a) Notice the Samaritans (to keep it simple even though they weren't known as that yet) did not like that answer, and worked to frustrate the Israelites building the temple. If they're believing in all gods, why didn't they just say, "go build it, good luck to you, and we'll see you around sometime!" Why work to discourage the Israelites through the reigns of these emperors? (Realize on usually ruled until he died, then the next one took over.)

- b) First there is the "Spiritual (ok demonic) aspect". Satan has known since day one that he is only going to rule on earth until Jesus returns to rule. Therefore, Satan isn't crazy about a new temple being built because for all he knew, Jesus would come and rule from there! It is logical from his standpoint to work behind the scenes to slow down or stop this project.
  - c) From a literal standpoint, I'm willing to bet the Samaritans simply saw this group as a big threat to them. After all they've been living there through the Assyrian, Babylonian, and now the Persian rule. They didn't want to "rock the boat" by claiming this land belongs to just "Israel" and not the mixed multitude that makes up the Samaritans. Therefore, I'd bet their motivation was simply to prevent them from being influential in the area, and thus I see them working hard to stop this project. Whatever they did, it must have worked well, as they built essentially nothing for about half a century due to this discouragement!
14. Verse 6: At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.
- a) Notice the time lapse here. The Israelites returned under Cyrus. Two emperors later, we have a man named Xerxes ruling. Even by this time the Israelites still haven't finished the project. So why was it still an issue? Picture the Israelites living in Jerusalem. I picture a bunch of Israelites every time they walk past the unfinished temple thinking, "You know, we were sent here to finish that thing, yet it's still not done!" They recalled that they as a nation got kicked out of the land for not worshipping God properly, so I'm sure it scared them as they walked past that unfinished project every time.
  - b) Anyway, the religious Jewish people still wanted to finish what they were called to do, in spite of those trying to discourage them. God puts a desire in people's hearts to worship Him then just as He does today. Therefore the desire to finish the temple still existed even though a long time gap has expired.
  - c) Of course Satan still wants to prevent people from being a good witness. The Samaritans of course didn't want the competition. Bottom line, it's been probably 40 years since they got the original order to build and it's time for the enemies to try a formal complaint!
15. Verse 7: And in the days of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his associates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes. The letter was written in Aramaic script and in the Aramaic language.
- a) Time for a quick story about Middle East languages. During the time of the Babylonians, the official "diplomatic" language was called Aramaic. It's roughly similar to Hebrew, but still had it's differences. When the Israelites returned from Babylon, Aramaic became their common language. Jesus spoke in Aramaic. The Talmud, the official Jewish commentary on the bible is in Aramaic. Yes the New Testament was written in Greek, but that's due to the fact it was the common language of most of the Roman Empire. What scholars suspect is this letter was written in Aramaic and translated into Persian for the emperor. Enough of the "Inside baseball", what's the big deal about this letter. We'll find out in the next few verses of the text. (Scholars believe a copy of this letter is what Ezra put in the bible here!)
  - b) The names we get besides the Emperor are those who wrote the letter. Like Judas, they'll go down in history as those who opposed God's will and suffered for it.
16. Verse 8: Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows: <sup>9</sup> Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary, together with the rest of their associates--the judges and officials over the men from Tripolis, Persia, Erech and Babylon, the Elamites of Susa, <sup>10</sup> and the other people whom the great and honorable Ashurbanipal deported and settled in the city of Samaria and elsewhere in Trans-Euphrates. <sup>11</sup> (This is a copy of the letter they sent him.)
- a) OK, why all this more, "Inside baseball" stuff here? Why not just say those who desired to put a stop to the building project wrote a letter to the emperor? Part of it is to show who these men were and the power they had in that area at that time.
  - b) Remember how I called them "Samaritans"? That city was the capital for these men!

- c) If you don't know your Jewish history, it was the main capital of the North Israel Kingdom before it got conquered. (When I went to Israel a few years back, it's now an empty hill as it's dug up to study its history!) The term "TransEuphrates" simply refers to life as part of the Persian Empire west of the Euphrates River. The Persians had a word called "Satraps". It is how they divided up their empire into areas and demanded taxes from everyone. I'm logically speculating that the letter is appealing to the pocketbook of the Emperor. That'll be obvious in the next few verses.
  - d) There is an old expression of "Giving the devil his due". It refers to the fact he knows how the game is played and will do what he can to win or delay the inevitable. Therefore I am sure he's working behind the scenes to discourage the Israelites from working to complete the temple project.
  - e) While I'm in the neighborhood, let me ask a logical question, if Satan knows God will win in the end, why does he bother? Why work so hard to delay the inevitable? One reason is he knows he'll spend eternity in hell, so he's trying to delay that as long as possible! Yes I ponder why he just doesn't ask God to forgive him, but maybe it's too late for that. What you and I must be aware of is simply the fact that when we do any project that is making a difference for God, spiritual resistance will come with the territory as it is here!
  - f) OK enough with the weird stuff, onto the letter itself:
17. Verse 11 (cont.): To King Artaxerxes, from your servants, the men of Trans-Euphrates: <sup>12</sup> The king should know that the Jews who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations. <sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and the royal revenues will suffer. <sup>14</sup> Now since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonored, we are sending this message to inform the king, <sup>15</sup> so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place of rebellion from ancient times. That is why this city was destroyed. <sup>16</sup> We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates.
- a) Notice the letter said they're rebuilding the "city" not the temple. The letter is filled with a lot of half-truths. Yes the Israelites did have their battles with the Babylonians, as well as the Philistines, Edomites, etc. It doesn't mean they were against the Persian Empire. This letter is essentially a scare tactic! By the way, the letter will be mentioned again when we get to the book of Nehemiah.
  - b) Let's start with the big "why" question: Why give all these details? Why not just tell us the enemies of the Israelites wrote to the head guy to slow down the project. One reason is to understand Persian laws. Once a law is made, it can't be reversed. That's why this letter's got an emphasis on rebuilding the city and not the temple. If the letter just mentioned the temple, the emperor could have said, "Sorry, that deal is in place, can't stop it!"
  - c) The letter paints the fear that "if Jerusalem is rebuilt there goes the taxes!" Obviously that isn't going to happen strictly due to numbers. Still it had to make the emperor nervous as he depends upon taxes to pay for his lifestyle! Besides rebuilding the city wasn't in what's "on the books", so the current emperor can put a stop to that.
  - d) The "twist" is when the culprits get the response they want, they could say, don't go finish the temple, as it'll be the key landmark of the city. My whole point is this is a twisted way to get those Israelites to stop building by implying "it's against the law now".
  - e) Yes the king is going to say in effect, "Good idea, I need their taxes and those Israelites are a rebellious bunch. It's always easy to point the finger at someone else. He could say we need to make an example out of them, or else more rebellion will come. When someone is controlling a large territory, setting tough examples is necessary in order to well "keep the money flowing". Bottom line, the emperor is going to approve of this.

18. Verse 17: The king sent this reply: To Rehum the commanding officer, Shimshai the secretary and the rest of their associates living in Samaria and elsewhere in Trans-Euphrates: Greetings.<sup>18</sup> The letter you sent us has been read and translated in my presence.<sup>19</sup> I issued an order and a search was made, and it was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition.<sup>20</sup> Jerusalem has had powerful kings ruling over the whole of Trans-Euphrates, and taxes, tribute and duty were paid to them.<sup>21</sup> Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order.<sup>22</sup> Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interests?
- a) Let me ask the question I posed earlier? Why all these details? Why not just say the really bad dudes wrote a letter full of half-truths and false threats to the king and he replied that the Israelites should stop building? Why have about twenty verses, with a copy of what's the original letter? Why make these details part of the bible? Yes we get it authenticates what happened. Still couldn't Ezra get to the point a lot faster? The underlying point (in my opinion) is to show the lengths that those who oppose the work of God will go to. Yes all of this is true, but it misses the point of what God wants to accomplish.
  - b) Let me ask a related question, if God wants the temple built so bad, why didn't he just kill these guys? Better yet if God wanted a temple so bad, why didn't He just "zap one" where the old one stood? Why make the Israelites go through all this trouble and why allow the bad dudes to have their shining moment?
    - i) Part of the answer is we appreciate Him more when we have to go through all this trouble to show our loyalty to Him. It's a witness to others when we make a major effort to seek Him. Remember what's God's desire, people working together as to make a difference for Him in the world we live in. Therefore, God wants all of this effort to build the temple as a sign of our loyalty to Him.
    - ii) That leads us back to the bad guys. God allows it in a sense, to show He is greater than all efforts to rule against Him. Yes, I'm well aware millions of lives have been lost to fight evil, but in the end, God's will always triumphs. The reason He allows in this case Israel's enemies to discourage them is to test the Israelites to see if they still trust Him in spite of the problems of the moment (hopefully, we can all relate to that idea!) plus it shows those who oppose God's will what'll happen to them in the end if they continue down that path. Bottom line, He gets the glory after all of this is done at the end of the book.
    - iii) That leads back to you and me. Sometimes it's hard to see the big picture of we're wondering when do we cross the finish line. In a sense it's only when we get done with a project or enter in heaven. What I desire when I get to heaven far more than anything else is Jesus telling me, "Well done good and faithful servant". Do I mess up? Big time! Still all I can do is learn from my mistakes, ask for forgiveness as I'm still trying to make an effort to show my gratitude for my salvation by using some of my time to make a difference for Him. The reason I'm getting into all of this is I don't want you to look at your life and say, "What a waste". We've all messed up. All we can do is ask for forgiveness and move on to do the best we can. The great mistake is to think we can get into heaven based on all the good things we do. It is only by grace we're saved. The "works" is to show our gratitude to God for the gift of salvation. OK, I'm preaching to the choir here, back to the text.
  - c) The bottom line of the text itself, is that the letter was translated into Persian so it could be read to him. Then the emperor probably had somebody do a "Wiki search on Israel" (Yes I am joking) as he discovered all their history. The emperor then said in effect, "Guilty as charged". Those Israelites never denied their history! They knew they messed up as we messed up. They can only do what we are called to do, use our lives as a witness for Him, in spite of all the ways we've messed up! If you get that, you grasp an important aspect of living the lifestyle that God intended: Acknowledge our sins and accept forgiveness.

- d) Anyway as I've said a bunch of times by now, I'm sure the emperor was concerned about taxes, so that's why he agreed to what was said in the letter. Sometimes a politician wants to get somebody "off his back" and that may have been a reason to agree to this too. With all that said, time to get to the last two verses.
19. Verse 23: As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop. <sup>24</sup> Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.
- a) Bottom line, it worked. The enemies of the Israelites were successful in stopping their big construction project. Satan must have smiled that day thinking he won a big victory as he delayed God's plans and bought himself another day to rule until Jesus returns. Yes, we'll read of the Israelites "firing back" in the coming chapters. Just because a battle is lost does not mean the war is over. To quote a famous movie line, "It's not over until we say it is". I attribute that to God here in the sense that He gets the last word whether we like it or not!
- b) Notice the time frame here. Essentially it took the rule of a handful of emperors before all of God's intention of the temple being rebuilt did happen. Was God aware of the timing? Of course, He's God. In fact, from the year the temple was destroyed to the year when it got rebuilt was, guess what, 70 years! To use an old Jewish saying, "Coincidence is not a Kosher word".
- c) Again, the reason we get these details is not to learn ancient Israel history. It's so we know that when we set out to do a great task for God "spiritual resistance" comes with it, even if the resistance doesn't claim it to be that way. Satan will "do his best to thwart God's plans for the world", but His plans will prevail if we trust in Him and make an effort to use our lives for His glory. He will honor that as we honor Him with our lives. If you grasp that, you grasp what living the Christian life is all about.
- d) With that said, I'll wrap it up for this lesson. Let's pray for His guidance to make the type of difference He desires for our lives.
20. Heavenly Father, as we read of the Israelite struggles to accomplish what is Your will, help us to learn what is Your specific desire for our lives at the moment. Make it obvious to us what it is that You desire so that we can use our lives to make a difference for You. May Your Spirit guide us so that we will focus some of our time on what matters for all of eternity, using our lives as a witness for You. Guide us as You make it obvious what is Your will for us today. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen!