

Ezra 4:1-5:2 “Stop-Start”

For the Children: When I was in school, I often had trouble doing my homework. I would start it, then stop, then start again. Why do people have this problem with stopping and starting things? Usually because they are bored, or they don't know what they are doing, or they are distracted or would rather be doing something else. The only way to overcome that is to be convinced that what you are doing is most important and that you do have the ability to do it. When it comes to sticking at the things the Lord requires of us, we need His help to convince of the importance of what we do, and His help to enable us to do it. He gives that help by His Word and Spirit. **Questions:** Why are so many people against God's children? What are some of the ways the devil tries to destroy God's people? Why should God's people not fear too much what other people might do to us?

Introduction:

First Point: The Origin of the Hostility

- 1) Old Divisions: Old divisions between Judah-Benjamin and the 10 Northern tribes, seen from early on in Israel's history, may well have been a contributing factor to the hostility against the Returnees. For the “Samaritans” were formed from Northern Israelites merging with Gentiles deported by the Assyrians
- 2) The Offence of Separatism: The main reason, though, is the separatism of the Returnees. They refused to allow the “Samaritans” to help build the Temple and denied that they had anything in common religiously. The Returnees rightly discerned the syncretism of the “people of the land” – the corruption of their religion by mixing idolatry with Yahweh-worship. This made them “enemies” (v. 1). It is necessary to keep the true religion unmixed, but we must beware of spiritual pride
- 3) The Offence of Christ: True Israelites looked to the coming of the Messiah. That hope caused His light to shine from them. Satan leads his servants to follow him in hatred of God's people who reflect that light, even in the OT. God's people have been and will be persecuted as a result. See Jn. 15, 2 Tim. 3:12

Second Point: The Nature of the Opposition

- 1) Bribery and Corruption: The “people of the land” hired/bribed counsellors to thwart the counsel of the Returnees before the Persian kings. They fed a biased view to the kings. The more a society departs from the Gospel, the more corrupt the use of government against the faith, the more injustice one sees in official decisions
- 2) Playing on Fear: The opposition played on the fears of the Persian government. They asserted that the Jews would rebel and refuse to pay taxes if allowed to rebuild their city – a city with a history of rebellion. The king would lose revenue, his honour and eventually his province, if he did not act. The king should check the historical records to see the truth of these accusations. The Persians were already plagued by civil and external wars. Work on the rebuilding was ordered to stop until further notice
- 3) Force of Arms: The opposition returned to Jerusalem and stopped the work by force of arms – a favourite tool of Satan's, then, in Christ's time, and now

Third Point: The Church's Response to Opposition

- 1) The Paralysis of Fear: The actions of the “people of the land” frightened the Returnees – even their lives were threatened (Neh. 4:11) – and they became “discouraged” (their hands made weak). The re-building stopped for 14 years because of the paralyzing effect of fear. See Phlp. 4:6. The people turned instead to the safer pastime of building up their own houses and wealth. The irony is that this did not bring freedom from trouble or blessing: God blesses *faithfulness*, not cowardice!
- 2) Revival by the Word: The change was brought about by the preaching of the Word of God by the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. These prophets “supported” the Returnees, by calling on them to trust the Lord rather than to fear; to work to serve the Lord rather than looking out for their own interests. This is how revivals begin: by the operation of God's Word and Spirit, not just by the initiative of brave men

Conclusion: