



Biblical Building

Sermon #8

‘When God Allows a Halt!’

Ezra 4:17-24

Sunday, June 29th

Last Sunday in the Biblical Building Sermon Series:

- Last Sunday we were able to look at how Rehum and Shimshai sent a letter to King Artaxerxes I asking him to restrict the Jews from rebuilding the temple.
 - *From Ezra 4:17-24, I preached a sermon entitled, ‘Unnecessary Undermining!’.*
 - I asked the question: *How do these inhabitants of the same province that the Jews lived in unnecessarily undermine the Jews and their work to rebuild the temple?*
- We looked at:
 - **Truth #1: The Opposition.** (vv. 7-11a)
 - **Truth #2: The Letter.** (vv. 11b-16)

- We also looked at how Rehum gave 4 reasons as to why Artaxerxes I shouldn’t allow the Jews to rebuild the temple.
- If you missed last week’s sermon you can watch it here: <https://youtu.be/b-RRNwqzQ8>

‘When God Allows a Halt!’

Ezra 4:17-24

Sermon in a Sentence:

In this passage of Scripture God allowed a Halt through the outside opposition that continued due to their own pursuit of their personal happiness. In this text we see that the complaint is taken seriously, the construction is stopped, and complete story is not shared.

Intro:

- I’m not sure about you, but when it comes to driving one of the most frustrating things, is seeing an array of red lights and the flow of traffic coming to a complete halt.
 - *In the digital age, this can be translated to mean that you look down at your GPS and all you see is a long red line for miles down on your phone.*
 - *Recently with the road work and construction that is being done on I-26, it is near impossible to drive from here to an upstate destination without traffic coming to a halt.*

- *Sometimes when we are hit with a HALT, a big stop sign, it can be pretty frustrating.*

- **Personal Illustration**

- *As I've told you all in my personal testimony before, coming out of College at AU I was ready to go to Texas, attend seminary and Pastor in Texas.*
- I was ready, we had traveled out there, and God put a HALT to that dream.
 - *Why?*
 - *Because our dreams are not always synonymous with God's plans for us. Even if the dreams we have are good and we believe they may honor and Glorify God, it does not mean that they are the plans God has in store.*
- As we conclude Ezra Chapter 4 today, we find that the letter Rehum and Shimshai sent to Artaxerxes I did reach his ears (maybe not his hands as most scholars believe he was illiterate, which was quite normal for Kings at the time).
 - *And as we are going to discover in our text, Artaxerxes I succumbed to the pressure of the letter (full of exaggerations), and ordered the work to stop.*

- *Did you notice that earlier in our study of Ezra things seemed to just fall in place beautifully for the Jews?*

- Now all of a sudden, the work stopped because the government came in and stopped them. They were threatened.
 - *Even if God allows a Halt, does not mean that He will not complete the work. It just means not right now, not at this time...*
- We shouldn't be shocked when we come to red lights this in our lives that are caused by people or groups who oppose God.
- *Remember what Jesus said to His disciples?*
 - 'I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.' John 16:33
- *Groups of people in the Bible who faced temporary trials, when God allowed a HALT:*
 - The returning exiles here.
 - Moses and the Israelites as they were kept out of the promised land (in that case due to their own disobedience).
 - Jesus faced so much opposition.
 - As did Paul.
 - The Early Christian Church? The Church of Acts? They endured slander, lies, distortions, and claims that they were cannibals because

they partook of the Lord's Supper! They even endured claims that they believed in incest because they called those in the faith Brother and Sister.

- ***Yes, sometimes God will allow outside opposition to come to a HALT, but this does not change the unshakeable theological truth that God is in complete control, and while satan may win a battle or two, he will not win the war.***

○ ***God has already accomplished that victory.***

Question to Ask:

What unfolds in this text that describes why God allowed the rebuilding of the temple to come to a halt, all of a sudden?

Truth #1: The Complaint is Taken Seriously. (vv. 17-20)

- When we left off last Sunday, we had read and carefully looked through the letter that Rehum wrote (by Shimshai's hand) to Artaxerxes.
 - Obviously, this was a complaint that came from the Samaritan leaders, Rehum especially.
 - We are going to find in verses 17-20 that the complaint made by Rehum and other Samaritan leaders, was going to be taken seriously by Artaxerxes I and then he was going to act on it.
 - ***In this, there's a good reminder for us.***
 - ***If we make a complaint, of any kind in anyway (verbal or by means of the keyboard), we must realize that our***

exaggerations or lack thereof could hurt individuals...

- Rehum was going to ruin the spirit of God's people and derail them from their mission for 15 years, but that's just what he intended to do...
- ***Formalities Expressed. (vv. 17-18)***
 - 'The king sent an answer: "To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now **18** the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me.'
 - King Artaxerxes begins his response letter with Persian Pleantries...
 - ***It is believed that the author of Ezra (which I believe was Ezra) had a copy of these letters, because the pleantries of the persians that were custom at the time are verbatim here compared with other royal letters from Artaxerxes at the time.***
 - Mervin Brenham said '***Letters could travel between Samaria and the Persian court in about a week.***'
 - It seems, that even in the kindness of the pleantries (if Artaxerxes had disagreed with their exaggerated claims he

wouldn't have taken time to be kind),
that he was taken in by this wicked plot
to stop the Jews...

- *Now, Artaxerxes is going to reveal that he did do some research...*

- **Findings Exchanged. (v. 19)**

- 'And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it.'
- This particular decree was simply that the archives be opened up.
- *When opening up the archives Artaxerxes was able to have a history lesson.*

- *The findings he exchanged in verse 19 were:*

- 'it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it.'
- *Since Artaxerxes does not reference it, we cannot be 100% sure of which time he was referring to...*
 - *The jews had multiple times in their history when they were*

rebellious to God and human rulers.

- But most scholars (including myself though I am not a scholar) believe that the 'long history of revolt' is a reference to Hezekiah's revolt against Sennacherib in approximately 700 B.C. as well as the participation of later kings in revolts against the Babylonians.

- *While parts of Rehum's letter were exxagerations, this one can't be denied.*

- All throughout the canon of Scripture there are accounts of the Israelites disobeying God and unjustly attacking their neighbors. Non-canonical items of Scripture also back this up.

- **Fibs Enlarged. (v. 20)**

- 'And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid.'
- *Verse 20, for Aramaic scholars, is the hardest verse to translate from the aramaic portions of literature in the book of Ezra.*
 - I believe the mighty kings that are referenced here would be David and Solomon.

- We know it's not a reference to Saul.
- *The difficult part of understanding verse 20 is this statement:*
 - 'who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid.'
 - While Israel was at its largest under David and Solomon, it was not near as big to be even close to beyond the Euphrates river.
- *So, how/can this be reconciled?*
 - Some of the Aramaic words that are used here are said by scholars of that language to be 'big' words with no 'bite'.
 - Meaning, there were some fibs in the letter from Rehum that were enlarged, bigger than they were.
 - *Which should cause you and I to slow down and caution ourselves. What we say, especially when we exaggerate, is quite a big deal. We must be careful with our words.*
 - *Specifically in this case, Artaxerxes took the words of Rehum, and accused the Israelites of crossing the Euphrates*

river in their 'Prime' under great kings, when that was just simply not the case.

- Biblical and historical records of the time back this up...
 - Complaints when not constrained (aka Southern Translation: Nipped in the Bud), can destroy people groups and their desire to follow God's will.
- Truth #2: *The Construction is Stopped. (vv. 21-23)***
- Now that the letter had been read, Artaxerxes was able to do his digging into the historical record, it was time to write back to *Rehum* and *Shimshai*.
 - Artaxerxes sends his response and he agrees with Rehum and Shimshai, he wants the work on the temple to cease.
 - *The sad reality here is that he didn't stand up to Rehum on behalf of the Jews, like Cyrus had done, he just goes along with the plan.*
 - Sure, he did 'some' of his own historical digging as a nice token, but he went with the plan.
 - *It is a sad thing when a leader will go along with the plans of a few, instead of standing up for the many (in this case, the Jews).*
 - The construction is stopped, and it is a shame, because as we'll see in a few minutes some of the Jews will take

advantage of this and build nice paneled homes for their homes.

- ***The Response of Artaxerxes I. (vv. 21-22)***
 - ‘Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. **22** And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?’
 - ***Notice here that Artaxerxes orders that the rebuilding of the temple could not continue until it was approved by him.***
 - ***This does not prohibit an appeal, which the Jews will not do, and we will see why in a bit.***
 - ***There’s an important detail of all this that we must not leave out.***
 - Artaxerxes I never gave permission for them to rebuild the wall (if that’s what they were in fact doing).
 - The permission they had been given was from Cyrus, and that was to rebuild the temple.
 - ***Either way, this could have caused Artaxerxes I to grow in his own suspicion.***
 - There’s another small but big detail to point out in verse **21** of the King’s response...
 - ‘Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be

not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me.’

- See that last phrase in verse 21, ***‘until a decree is made by me.’***
 - While Artaxerxes is sending the decree that Rehum can go and tell the Jews that they must stop building, he did allow some flexibility in his clause, if he changed his mind.
 - ***Hold on to this nugget of truth as it will be useful in just a few moments...***
 - (This ounce of flexibility, shows to me, that if the Israelites were to fight back, even a little with an appeal or a small uproar, they may have been able to keep building.)
 - I think even this subtle phrase of flexibility by Artaxerxes shows that he could have been persuaded...
 - ***But, as we’ll see when we look at Haggai’s account, the Israelites did not want to push***

*back... they wanted
personal gain...*

- ***The Ruin that Rehum caused. (v. 23)***
 - ‘Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.’
 - Of course, Rehum & Shimshai along with their crew barreled down to Jerusalem to give the Jews the decree.
 - ***The Scripture tells us that they did so in ‘haste’ because this had been their plan all along.***
 - ***It is a sad thing that others will prey on someone’s downfall so violently. It happens from outside opposition like in this case, and I would argue it happens even more from the inside.***
 - ***When looking at the phrase in verse 23 ‘by force’ in the Hebrew, it carries the meaning that they probably took a group of soldiers with them, just in case they meet any opposition.***
 - ***Remember, Rehum was a military commander.***
 - The great scholar of yesteryear, Charles Fensham wrote ‘This was a day of great shame to the Jewish population because

their honest endeavor was thwarted by their archenemies, the Samaritans, and it was forced on them by Samaritan soldiers.

- ***Our enemy, the Devil aka satan is not all powerful, but he is also not stupid.***
- When satan strikes, he does so where it hurts.

■ ***So, not only did the Jews have to stop rebuilding the temple that they were so excited about, it came at the hand and force of their archrival, the Samaritans.***

- Satan could’ve used another people group to deliver the blow, but he didn’t want to just hurt the Jews, he wanted to dampen their spirit...

Truth #3: The Complete Story is not Shared. (v. 24)

- We’ve all heard the phrase, ‘there’s always more to the story?’.
 - Or the phrase ***‘If you want to find the truth, it’s usually somewhere in the middle of two individuals’.***
 - That is the case here. As I have said many times, Scripture does not contradict Scripture, but Compliments Scripture.

- *When looking at verse 24, we find that there is more to this story...*
- ‘Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.’ Ezra 4:24
 - To provide context here, the word ‘then’ in verse 24 is actually connecting all the way back to Ezra 4:5.
 - ‘and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.’ Ezra 4:5
 - *Now we are given the outcome of all that occurred. The rebuilding has stopped.*
 - *Most scholars and theologians believe that the amount of time of inactivity in the rebuilding of the temple was 15-16 years, and I do agree with that.*
 - There is 1 important thing to point out here.
- *Wait just a minute, get all the facts! (v. 24)*
 - Our scripture passage this morning is true, the work of the temple did in fact stop because of the opposition and this letter that was written and given to Artaxerxes I.
 - 3 years ago I preached verse-by-verse through the book of Haggai in four

sermons. Let’s rewind our minds back to that book for a moment...

- *Ezra (who I believe is the author) tells part of the story, but not the entire story.*
 - Haggai 1:3 helps us to fill in the blanks of what Ezra 4:24 does not tell us.
 - *‘Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 4 “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? 5 Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. 6 You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.’ Haggai 1:3-6*
- *So, the opposition did occur, but I think it coincided with their own desires to spend money on paneled houses, while the house of God still lay in ruin.*
 - *Without a doubt for some of the Jews, the opposition from the outside served as a welcome roadblock. One that could*

lead to more comfort and personal gain.

- As we studied in our Haggai series three years ago, it wouldn't be until August 29th of 520 B.C. that Haggai would deliver a series of messages through December 18th of that same year, that the heart of the people began to stir.
 - *The Jews truly got complacent, I'm sure they could have attempted to appeal, 15 years is a long time to choose not to go against a court's decision.*
- *So what happened?*
 - Combined with Haggai's testimony and sermons, I truly believe that the Jews did not want the temple to be built bad enough.
 - If it worked out the first time, great. But once opposition came, they realized they could use Cyrus's money grants that he gave them to build some nice homes. And that's just what they did.
 - *That's any Pastor's fear when God leads a Church to shuffle dirt.*
 - *I pray everyday, that if this is truly God's will for us for a time such as this, that when opposition comes (not if), and if God allows a Halt, we will still seek for His will to be done.*

- The point is that once opposition comes is that the Church doesn't stutter and stammer, and all of a sudden, we stop following what God has told us.

- *Ezra doesn't share that portion of the story and we don't know why.*
 - But there's no need to speculate, God made sure that part of the story was also known because of the work and ministry of Haggai.
 - *This is something for us to keep in mind, if we stop doing what the Lord has called us to do, He will know our hearts and our thoughts.*
- May we not get frustrated with opposition that we know is going to come. May we not be tempted to use what God has called us to do and given us to accomplish His will, for our own glory and comforts.
 - Once scholar, Mark D. Roberts stated, *'These difficulties, of course, further hindered work on the temple. Although not stated specifically, we can imagine how the people of Judah, faced with threats and harassment from outsiders, turned away from God's work to meet their personal needs. Then, as years passed, it became easier and easier to*

procrastinate at resuming work on the temple.'

Conclusion:

- 'What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be[a] against us?' Romans 8:31
 - *This is a great verse of Scripture, and one that many of us can quote and know by heart.*
- But how many of us live by this verse?
 - *When opposition comes to the Biblical Building Giving Initiative at FBCG, are we going to live by the Fact that God is on our side?*
 - *When opposition comes to your marriage are you going to live by the Fact that God is on your side or take the easy way out?*
 - *When economic hardships hit your family hard, are you going to live by the fact that God is on your side, or are you going to keep praying, hoping and fighting for your family?*
 - *When you receive a cancer or another medical diagnosis are you going to remember that God is on your side and that His plans, ways, and thoughts are better than all of our own?*
- Sometimes God does allow HALTS to happen, sometimes from the outside or inside.
 - *The main question, are we going to allow those HALTS to cause us to serve our own kingdoms, and not further seek to obey God*

and grow His Kingdom here in Gaston, and beyond?

- George Whitfield was the great colonial evangelist who was able to lead many people to Christ and seek to make many Churches healthy. He was a pruner of Churches.
 - *Due to his impactful ministry in following the Lord and preaching His Word, he did in fact face a lot of opposition.*
 - *In 1739 the colony's enjoyed freedom of speech. In 1739 alone, there were 49 published articles and or books about the Evangelist George Whitfield. Of the 49, only 10 spoke favorable of him and his ministry.*
 - When you follow the Lord and His ways, you will not be the most popular, even among God's people.
 - *God may allow a temporary HALT but it's not a forever HALT.*