

# THE MESS BETWEEN YOUR EARS

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 4

Fourth Message

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*Ezra 4*

David Wilcox sings of what's going on in his head:

I've got such a mess between my ears  
Like dishes in the sink  
Stuff I don't believe just tumbles in  
Till I don't have room to think  
All my failures are on display  
The broken dreams of yesterday  
The stuff I should have thrown away  
But I've kept it here instead  
I've gotta empty out the inside of my head.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we don't know what we think. Sometimes we know what we think, but we don't know why we think it. Where do these thoughts that occur in our minds come from, anyway: from ourselves, from God, or from someplace else? Perhaps there are times when we feel as if we need to empty out the inside of our heads.

And what is true, anyway?

In Ezra 3, the returning exiles laid the foundation of the rebuilt temple. Some of the old men who had seen the first temple weren't happy, however. In fact, they wept. The narrator does not report what effect this had on the temple builders, but it's not difficult to put yourself in their shoes and imagine that they might have been discouraged.

Discouragement can come from within the community. Discouragement can come from outside the community, as it does in Ezra 4.

## Adversaries offer to help

**Ezra 4:1-5:**

**Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, 2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing**

**to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here." 3 But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."**

**4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build 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.**

Although the people of the land offer to help the returning exiles build the temple, the narrator identifies them not as friends but as "adversaries." Their offer, then, is insincere. Their claim that they worship the Lord, the God of Israel, and have been sacrificing to him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who reigned from 681 to 669 B.C., has a ring of truth to it (2 Kings 17:24-41, Jeremiah 41:5).

In apparent deference, they refer to the Lord as "your" God, not "our" God. However, like many others who have been drawn to the Lord, they have not forsaken their gods. They've just added the Lord to their collection in order to hedge their bets. "So these nations feared the Lord and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children—as their fathers did, so they do to this day" (2 Kings 17:41).

The leaders of Israel give the people of the land two reasons for rejecting their offer. First, the leaders say the people of the land have "nothing to do with" building a house to "our" God. Second, the leaders say that Cyrus, the king of Persia, commissioned them, not the people of the land, to build the temple (Ezra 1:2-4). The leaders have both theological and legal grounds for rejecting the offer. Although it is possible to find common cause with worshipers of other gods, the leaders discern that they cannot do so with these people for this purpose at this time.

Their decision proves to be wise, because the people of the land, once their offer is rejected, show their true colors. We are not to believe that the people of the land turned on the people of Judah out of spite but that they all along planned to thwart the building project and that their offer of help was just a ruse. Once Plan A fails, they resort to Plan B: psychological manipulation and bribery.

## Harmful suggestions

The people of Judah and Benjamin had enemies who opposed their work. I am not aware that we have enemies who oppose our work in the same way. For example, in all my time at PBC, I have not heard of anyone who has offered to help our church with the intention of infiltrating it and destroying it. That's not to say that no one will employ such tactics in the future, and by all means, we must remain watchful for all sorts of wolves in sheep's clothing.

Remember, Jesus said, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). If we are as Jesus wants us to be, then it is possible for us to partner with those outside the faith in righteous causes. On the one hand, we can partner with, say, atheists to support the poor. On the other hand, we can partner with, say, Mormons to support the unborn.

Moreover, we need not be so concerned with human opposition that we forget about the enemies the New Testament alerts us to: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

Satan and his demons employ the kinds of tactics employed by the enemies of Judah and Benjamin. They attempt to infiltrate our minds with suggestions that seem helpful but which turn out to be harmful. One of the ways they do this is through what we see, read, and hear on our screens. In this way, the evil one promotes approaches to, say, money, sex, and power that run contrary to biblical approaches.

Many people in our part of the world think they should be able to do what they want to do whenever they want to do it. That way of thinking comes from the pit of hell.

In C.S. Lewis' fanciful depiction of hell in his novel *The Great Divorce*, everyone is able to do whatever they

want to do whenever they want to do it, and everyone is miserable. They're even able to visit the outskirts of heaven, and some of them do so. They're even more miserable in heaven than they were in hell because heaven is too real, so they turn around and go back.

## Renew your mind

What do we do about the mess between our ears, the one that Satan exacerbates? It is imperative that we continually renew our minds with the truth of the Scriptures so that we can recognize the suggestions as harmful and "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (Romans 12:1-2, Ephesians 4:23, 2 Corinthians 10:5).

Dallas Willard comments:

*The ultimate freedom we have as individuals is the power to select what we will allow or require our minds to dwell upon and think about. By think we mean all the ways in which we are aware of things, including our memories, perceptions, and beliefs. The focus of your thoughts significantly affects everything else that happens in your life and evokes the feelings that frame your world and motivate your actions . . . .*

*We bring the reality of God into our lives by making contact with him through our minds, and our actions are based on the understanding that results from the fullness of that contact. There is nothing mysterious here. This is why **the mind, and what we turn our minds to, is the key to our lives.**<sup>2</sup>*

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8).

In the play and the movie *A Man for all Seasons*, Thomas More proclaims, "God made the angels to show him splendor, as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind." If we are to serve God in the tangle of our minds, we must renew our minds.

## Not-as-important issues

As we renew our minds with the Scriptures, we come to realize that some things aren't exactly clear. Some things are clear—and clearly important. Some things are not as clear—and clearly not as important. Even the apostle Peter, one of the authors of the New Testament,

acknowledges that there are some things in the letters of the apostle Paul, another author of the New Testament, that are “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16)—which is a remarkable statement when you think about it. One author of the New Testament, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says that another author of the New Testament, also inspired by the Holy Spirit, can be hard to understand.

One of the ways Satan tries to destroy churches is by creating factions based on not-as-important issues. Make no mistake, Satan wants to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. He wants to destroy this church. He is no doubt attempting to do so even now.

As elders, we don’t agree on everything, and we don’t need to agree on everything, but we agree on what we consider to be the most important issues and on a particular approach to ministry that features shared leadership, expository preaching, equipping the saints for the work of the ministry, dependence on the Spirit, and mission to the world.

Today, Satan is having a field day with churches by creating factions based on differing political views. Richard Lovelace observes, “We’re operating like an army without intelligence, beating the air and one another at times, fighting flesh and blood instead of the principalities and powers that lie behind them”<sup>3</sup>

Based on the Scriptures, which political party should you affiliate with? Should you affiliate with any political party? How should you vote? After endeavoring to renew my mind in the Scriptures for thirty-five years now, I will tell you my answer to all these questions: I don’t know. At PBC, we uphold biblical values, but we understand that there are different ways to vote based on those values.

In Ezra 4:6-23, the narrator suspends the story of Ezra 1:1-5 and jumps ahead in time. The next section, then, is a flash-forward. In this section, the narrator shows that the opposition to the work of the returning exiles continued beyond the reign of Cyrus king of Persia (559-530 B.C.) and into the reigns of future Persian kings: Darius (522-486 B.C.), Ahasuerus (486-465 B.C.), and Artaxerxes (465-425 B.C.).

Just as the people of the land didn’t let up, we can’t expect Satan and his demons to let up either.

## Opposition continues

**Ezra 4:6-16:**

**And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.**

**7 In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows: 9 Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, 10 and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River. 11 (This is a copy of the letter that they sent.) “To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now 12 be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. 13 Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. 14 Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, 15 in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste. 16 We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.”**

First, the narrator flashes forward to the reign of Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, who succeeded Darius as king of Persia. During his reign, just as during the reigns of Cyrus and Darius, the people of the land opposed the people of Judah. The narrator, however,

gives us no details about the nature of the opposition other than to say that the people of the land wrote a letter of accusation against the people of Judah. His purpose is to report that the opposition continued into the reign of Ahasuerus.

Second, the narrator flashes forward to the reign of Artaxerxes, who succeeded Ahasuerus as king of Persia. Again, the people of the land wrote a letter of accusation to the king of Persia. This time the narrator gives us plenty of details. The people of the land, who come from different nations, find common cause in their opposition to the people of Judah.

Earlier, the people of the land opposed the rebuilding of the temple. Now, they oppose the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and its walls. In their letter, they portray the people of Judah as a threat to rulers of Persia. They portray the people who are engaged in the work as “rebellious and wicked.”

The people of the land warn that once the people of Judah become established, they will refuse to pay tribute to the rulers of Persia. Their deference to the king’s reputation rings more than a little hollow. They defer only to win his favor.

To convince the king that the people of Judah pose a threat, they petition him to search the records and see that the people of Judah have rebelled against rulers in prior days and that as a result, Jerusalem was destroyed. True, the people of Judah rebelled against Babylon, and Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 24:1, 24-26). However, the Persian kings have taken a different, more friendly, approach to the people of Judah, and the people of Judah have thus far shown no inclination to rebel against Persia.

Moreover, unbeknownst to the people of the land, the theological reason for the destruction of Jerusalem was rebellion not against any earthly kingdom but rebellion against the Lord. The Lord raised up Babylon to conquer the people of Judah because of their persistent idolatry (2 Chronicles 36:15-19, Ezra 5:12).

Finally, the people of the land suggest that if the people of Judah complete their work and rebel against Persia, their rebellion will spread to others and that the king will have no possession “Beyond the River”—that is, in the land of Canaan, west of the Euphrates River.

## Don’t worry about your reputation

The people of God were considered to pose a threat to their rulers. They were called rebellious and wicked. They were considered to be opposed to paying taxes.

How are we as the church viewed? By and large, the church as whole is not viewed in a favorable light these days. But we cannot concern ourselves with that. It matters little how we are viewed; it matters much how we are. We have little control over how we are viewed; we have much control over how we are.

What matters is not whether we are *called* rebellious. What matters is whether we *are* rebellious—rebellious against the Lord, that is. Indeed, the people of God had rebelled against him; that’s why he sent them into exile. As the people of God, we are called to make every effort to submit to governing authorities, not rebel against them. We are called to pay our taxes, even if our taxes are used in ungodly ways (Mark 12:17, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17).

We must make every effort to follow the Lord, especially in accordance with the Scriptures, and if we are considered to be a threat, if we are considered to be rebellious and wicked, if we are considered to be opposed to paying taxes, we can live with such accusations, whether they are true or not, because we are most concerned with living with the Lord. Let’s do the best we can to renew our minds and follow Jesus, and let God take care of our reputations.

How will King Artaxerxes respond to the request of the people of the land?

## The king sends an answer

**Ezra 4:17-23:**

**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. 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. 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. 21 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?"

**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.**

The king of Persia, Artaxerxes, complies with the petition of the people of the land and orders a search of the records. Indeed, the king says the records show that the people of Judah have rebelled in the past. Perceiving the people of Judah to be a possible threat, the king agrees with the people of the land and orders the people of Judah to cease and desist.

There are places in the world where governing authorities order churches to cease and desist. This place isn't one of them. Governing authorities aren't any stricter with us than they are with businesses. Some thought governing authorities used the pandemic as an opportunity to rein in churches, but they didn't rein us in any more than they did restaurants and theaters. In fact, as a non-profit, we get some tax breaks. Even so, the future, of course, holds no guarantees.

Should we be concerned?

In verse 24, after the flash-forward of verses 6 to 23, the narrator returns to the story he broke off after verse 5.

## The work stops

**Ezra 4:24:**

**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.**

Just as the people of Judah later stopped work on the city and the walls, they stop work on the temple. Whereas the king of Persia employed military force to stop them from working on the city and its walls, no ruler forces them to stop work on the temple. Instead, they capitulated to the machinations of the people of the land. Sixteen years later, during the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia, they will take up the work again.

## Jesus will build his church

The people of Judah and Benjamin capitulated to the machinations of the people of the land; we must not capitulate to the machinations of Satan and his demons. We must continually renew our minds not least so that we can continue building, and rebuilding, the community that God has given us.

Cyrus, a pagan king, commissioned Judah and Benjamin to build the temple. Who commissions us to build our community? A different king. Our king told Peter, one of his disciples, ". . . I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

If we renew our minds, we have nothing to worry about. We can and should be aware of the machinations of the evil one, but we need not be concerned. Jesus will build his church. He will use us to build his church. Nothing can stop him. If you remain watchful, you will see Jesus building his church.

When we started planning the Fall Retreat earlier this year, we wondered if anyone would want to come during the pandemic. Turns out we ended up with a waiting list. Thankfully, we were able to get everyone off the waiting list. Four of our younger pastors preached great messages that ministered to all generations, which bodes well for the future. The host for the retreat, Oliver Miao, was not only an unbeliever when he first came here, he was anti-Christian, but Jesus turned him around.

Two young men stepped forward to be baptized. In the process of meeting with one of them, Caleb Gray, I learned that his father, Eric Gray, was baptized at our first Fall Retreat nineteen years ago. Two weeks ago, Eric got in the Mission Springs swimming pool, the same pool he was baptized in almost two decades ago, to help me baptize his son.

Jesus is building his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

## Ask a question

When the mess between your ears makes you feel that you need to empty out the inside of your head, ask yourself this question: What is true? Perhaps you're anxious and stressed because you are believing that which is not true. Perhaps you have heeded one or more of the evil one's harmful suggestions. What is true? How do you answer that question?

Have at your ready an answer that you know to be true. Lately, I've been answering the question with Psalm 23:1: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." As I mentioned a few weeks ago, when considering the way language is used today, the word "want" would be better translated "lack."

What is true? The Lord is your shepherd; you shall not lack. That's true!

Renew your mind!

## Endnotes

1. Lyrics.com, STANDS4 LLC, 2021. "**The Inside of My Head Lyrics.**" Accessed October 15, 2021. <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/26278563/David+Wilcox>.
2. Dallas Willard, *Life Without Lack* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 3, 11.
3. Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 137.