**Screwtape Strategies**

 ***Ezra 4:1-24 (Cyclical Inductive)***

**Purpose or Desired Listener Response (Step 4)**

The listeners will gain awareness that the enemy of God’s people utilizes varied and persistent schemes against them that can effectively paralyze their work for God.

# Introduction

### Interest:

### How many of you have read “Screwtape letters” by CS Lewis? In the book, an imaginary devil named “Screwtape,” writes to mentor his nephew on how to harass and bring about the spiritual destruction of a Christian.

### I would like you to imagine now, that *you* are Screwtape. Standing in Satan’s shoes, and you look at yourself: what strategy will you employ to achieve your own spiritual downfall … or that of your local church?

### Need: Are you aware of the opposition you *really* face in doing God’s work?

### Subject: As God’s people, do we know *how* Satan wages warfare against us?

### Background:

### Ezra-Nehemiah revolves around the conflict between Israel as a collective whole and their enemies.

### In Ezra 1, Cyrus issues an edict to build the temple. In Ezra 2, the Israelites return and settle back into Jerusalem. By the end of chapter 3, the altar and foundation has been constructed. In Ezra 3:10-13 we see a mini climax in the story of the temple reconstruction! God is praised for His goodness and steadfast love towards Israel in restoring His people.

### But this celebration is intermingled with sorrow, which sets the tone of what is to come in the rest of the book. In 3:13 – the scene zooms out, away from the Israelites’ celebration and mini victory, and in Ezra 4 (today’s text) we come face to face… with Israel’s enemies.

### Who were these guys anyway? Well, Kidner writes in his commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah that when the Jews returned, “Judah was perhaps carved out of adjacent districts and newly granted an identity of its own…the ruffled feelings of officials shorn of part of their command may have helped to set the hostile tone.” I mean, imagine that after the issuance of a new government policy, I move in, knock down part of your house and set up my own home on what use to be part of your land – you would be really upset too.

### Now what’s interesting about Ezra 4, is that it covers 3 separate time frames. 4:1-5, 24 (Reign of Cyrus until 2nd year of Darius); 4:6 (Reign of Ahasuerus); 4:7-23 (Reign of Artaxerxes; time of Nehemiah). But no matter what time frame is being spoken about, we see Israel’s adversaries using all sorts of ways to oppose their restoration and building works!

### Preview: In chapter 4, the author of Ezra relates how the adversaries of Israel sought to oppose them in their building works. Restatement: Ezra 4 reveals how the enemies of God’s people seek to oppose the saints in our work for the Lord.

(So how does the devil oppose us? Text: Verses 1-5 tells us…)

# I. Satan opposes us persistently through the use of deceit and fear (4:1-5)

### When the adversaries of Judah heard that the Israelites were building a temple to the Lord, they approached them directly and said “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…” (4:2)

### In other words, they tried to infiltrate the Israelite community. This is a most deceitful strategy, because it is done under the guise of friendship. But the narrator plainly tells us that behind their sweet words, they are “the adversaries of Judah” (4:1).

### Furthermore, the reasons they gave are very persuasive. “We worship your God as you do!” But what they did not say is that they were concurrently worshipping other gods besides Yahweh. We see this from 2 Kings 17:29-41.

### Using half-truths and the pretense of friendship, they hoped to deceive the Israelites and infiltrate their community. And you know – that just like in a marriage – the closer someone gets to you, the more say and influence they have on you. What would happen if these people, who are not actually loyal to Yahweh, end up having a say in building Yahweh’s temple??

### Fortunately the leaders of Israel stood their ground. But the adversaries did not give up. Since their attempt to deceive through friendly measures did not work, they instead resorted to the use of discouragement and fear/threat [v4].

### But that’s not all, in v5, they even bribed counselors to frustrate the building process! If we turn to Haggai 1:2 you will see just how cunning the counsel was. [Haggai 1:2] Wow?! It sounds so *holy*! “we must wait for God’s timing…”

### Lastly, we read that they employed these tactics “All the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” That’s from 539BC – 522BC, 18 years!! You get a sense of just how persistent these guys were!

### (So what do we learn from v1-5 about how the enemy works? We learn that…)

## (4:1-3) Our enemy seeks to deceive through infiltration

## (4:4-5) Our enemy seeks to instill crippling fear and deceive us through counsel

## (4:4-5) Our enemy seeks to oppose us persistently

### These tactics sound familiar don’t they? For example, if we talk about discouragement and fear, think - when was the last time you felt discouraged in your walk with the Lord? When was the last time you just felt like giving up because serving (and studying) is just so painful?

### Or if we talk about infiltration, we recall Paul’s words in Acts 20 to the Elders of Ephesians. [Acts 20:28-31] Even before it happened, Paul knew the opposition that would tear at the church… would come from within. The church had been infiltrated.

### But infiltration can also take place on a personal level. The devil can infiltrate our heart. Infiltration is basically to get a foothold on someone, or something, and so veer it in a different direction. Dr Rick shared with another class of how a final year student from SBC did not finish his studies because while the church was using his laptop once, pornographic media un-intentionally got played instead. The enemy had infiltrated this student’s heart.

### A pastor once shared with me “if the devil cannot scare you, he will cover you with candy floss.” If he cannot stop us through fear and discouragement, he will try to stop us by deceiving us, through false counsel, or infiltrating our community… or infiltrating our hearts. And he doesn’t give up.

(Above are strategies targeted *towards God’s people themselves*. But is that all that our enemy has up his sleeves? No…in v4:6-16 we see that…)

# II. Satan (also) opposes us persistently via the manipulation of external powers (4:6-16)

### In v6, the narrator fast forwards to the reign of Ahasuerus (486-464BC) – This time the adversaries write an accusation against the Israelites, which means they bring false charges against them. Then in v7-8, during the reign of Artaxerxes (464-423BC), 2 different groups of adversaries write to the reigning king. By now, it is already 75 years since the opposition first started and they are still going at it…!

### Essentially we see the adversaries employing yet another different method to oppose the Israelites – they attempt to manipulate the power/political structures of their day to control the Israelites. It’s a use of the external power structures of the day to oppress God’s community.

### The opposition against God’s people has suddenly escalated tremendously in magnitude because the most powerful man in the land is now involved. So we see that…

## (4:6-8) Our enemy manipulates through persistent accusation of God’s people

### In v9-10, we have a list of those whose opinions are represented by the letter. We see a formidable list of adversaries consisting of…

### Those who are in positions of power and influence: judges, governors, officials etc.

### Multiple people groups: Persians, Babylonians, men of Susa etc. and…

### “the rest of the nations … settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River”/ “the men of the province Beyond the River.” In other words… everyone in the region except the Jews!! The sheer magnitude of the opposition is overwhelming! It feels just like what we are up against today isn’t it? The whole world against God’s people… so we see that…

## (4:9-11) Our enemy manipulates through a show of power and numbers

### Finally, in v12-16, the adversaries lay out their case against the Jews. To cut the long story short, they essentially accused Jerusalem of being a “rebellious and wicked city.” (v12)

### They supported their claim by using Israel’s tragic history and track record as a weapon against her. (v15) “we send and inform the king, in order that search may be made in the book of the record of your fathers. You will find…from of old”

### In fact, their choice of accusation is brilliant because they so poignantly played on Artarxerxes fears. Artaxerxes became king by murdering his older brother. And during the earlier part of his reign the Egyptian revolt supported by the Greeks took place and lasted 12 years! This major challenge to Persian rule is likely to have caused Artaxerxes to pay serious attention to any charge of rebellion.[[1]](#footnote-1) And so we see that …

## (4:12-16) Our enemy manipulates by leveraging upon the desires/fear of those in power

### So through persistent accusation, through a show of power and numbers, through leveraging upon the fears/desires of those in power – the enemies of God’s people are able to oppose us persistently via the manipulation of external powers.

## Ill: When thinking about Satan using external power structures to oppose God’s people, I can’t help but think of a gathering of S.E.A church leaders I attended 2 years back. It was eye opening listening to the leaders from Sarawak share the challenges they faced. The bulk of Christians in Malaysia comes not from West Malaysia but East Malaysia. So if you want to attack the Christian population in Malaysia, it only makes sense to hit at the heart of where they come from: East Malaysia. Interestingly, the Christian population in Sarawak consists predominantly of the indigenous people - the Dyads. In fact the Christian Dyad population in Sarawak outnumber the Malay Muslim community! But the government has been fiercely advocating Islamisation. For example, English is no longer the medium used to teach in schools, and Muslim teachers are imported as a subtle tactic to carry out Islamisation. If a Dyad village has just 1 Muslim convert, a mosque is built. The government sends agents into the Dyad villages, offering monetary incentives for conversion to Islam and many of the Dyads are taken in because they are very poor. They sign the form offered, and when that happens, their next generation of children enter are raised as Muslims. As of 2009, there have been 11,000 Dyad conversions to Islam. And the target is to convert 30% of them by 2020. The use of external power and political structures for the opposition of God’s work is real, even today.

(What then are the results of the enemy’s varied and persistent strategies which we have reviewed thus far? In Ezra 4:17-24 we learn that… )

# III. We can be paralyzed in doing God’s work (4:17-24)

### Ezra 4:17-23 narrates how Artarxerxes basically buys into the adversaries’ arguments *completely.* He did as they proposed, made a search of Jerusalem’s track records, and concluded as the adversaries did that Jerusalem is indeed a city of rebellion. Artarxerxes’ conclusion is simple: the works are to stop at once.

### Likewise, in Ezra 4:24, we zoom back in time and we are told that the work on the temple stopped until the 2nd year of the reign of Darius. By then, the work on the temple had been stopped for 18 years.

### In either case, the point is the same: the work of God by His people was paralyzed by the schemes of the enemy.

## Ill: 2 years ago, I had this strange experience where I got up one day and found that my faith was completely gone. I suddenly didn’t believe in God, or Christ, or the reliability of the scriptures, or anything related. Its like suddenly turning from a Christian to an Atheist or Agnostic within a night. I tried arguing with the thoughts in my mind using words from the apostle Paul, but then questions such as - “did Paul really exist” would surface. I didn’t know what was happening to me. I was a youth leader then and I began thinking about how I should exit the ministry work on my hand, because someone who doesn’t believe in God cannot possibly be serving! A friend of mine told me this was spiritual warfare but I didn’t believe it. After some time through strange ways, God led me to print out the writing of John Bunyan from his book “grace abounding to the chief of sinners.” And I “randomly” printed to page 22. But it was exactly on pages 21-22 that I found the answer to my condition. Bunyan recorded in the 17th Century just about the exact experience I described in the 21st Century. First, he heard the words “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to hath you.” But he didn’t recognize that was God warning him. Shortly thereafter, whole floods of blasphemies, against God, Christ and the scriptures were poured upon his spirit, to his great confusion and astonishment. They stirred up questions in him, “against the very being of God, and of his only beloved son; as, whether there were, in truth, a god, or Christ, or no? And whether the Holy Scriptures were not rather a fable…” When I read this, it dawned upon me like a flash, that the questions in my head… maybe, were not mine. But for that short period of my life – the devil had paralyzed me, and nearly gotten me to quit serving God altogether.

(In conclusion, how does our enemy wage warfare against God’s people? Using Ezra 4 as a reference we see that…)

# Conclusion

### Satan uses varied and persistent strategies to paralyze our work for God (MI).

### He uses deceit and fear to frustrate us. He manipulates external powers to stop our work for God.

### Application: From today’s sermon, what strategies do you recognize are being used by the enemy in your own life, in your local church, or even the global church? Pray for the Lord’s deliverance and ask for a greater awareness of the warfare waged against you and the rest of God’s people.

1. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra Nehemiah Esther,* NAC(Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)