

Facing Opposition



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Ezra 4:1–5, 2 Cor. 6:14, Ezra 5:1–5, Haggai 1, Ezra 4:6–24, Nehemiah 4, Neh. 6:1–13.*

Memory Text: “But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them cease till a report could go to Darius. Then a written answer was returned concerning this matter” (*Ezra 5:5, NKJV*).

Ezra 3–6 is structured thematically, covering different historical periods of opposition to the rebuilding of the temple. Recognizing this thematic approach will help clarify the overall message.

Ezra is mentioned for the first time by name in *Ezra 7:1*. With his arrival in 457 B.C., things changed, and the city of Jerusalem with its wall began to be spasmodically rebuilt. Thirteen years later Nehemiah arrived (sent by Artaxerxes in 444 B.C.), and the building of the wall was finally resumed. Although the opposition was intense, the work was completed in 52 days (*Neh. 6:15*).

Resistance to the work of God is a prevalent theme in the two books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*; therefore, it is not surprising that rebuilding the temple and Jerusalem incited opposition and persecution. Wherever we turn in today’s world, the work of the Lord is resisted. Satan tries to make sure that the gospel doesn’t spread quickly, as it threatens his dominion. In *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, how did the Jews handle the opposition?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 26.

Opposition Begins

Read Ezra 4:1–5. Why do you think the Israelite remnant refused the help of other people in building the temple?

On the surface, the request seemed like a kind, neighborly thing to do; so, why turn down the help? In one sense, the answer is found in the text itself. The “adversaries” came to offer them help. *Adversaries?* That alone gives a powerful hint as to why the Israelites reacted as they did.

Why were the people called “adversaries”? Second Kings 17:24–41 explains that these people were imported from other nations into Samaria and the surrounding region after the Northern Kingdom Israelites were deported. The king of Assyria sent them priests, who were to teach them how to worship the God of the land; that is, the God of Israel. However, the resulting religion incorporated the Canaanite gods, as well. Therefore, the remnant Israelites were afraid that this religion would be brought into their temple worship. Hence, the best and smartest thing to do was what they did, which was to say, “No, thank you.”

We have to remember, too, just why all this was happening to begin with. It was their forefathers’ constant compromise with the pagan faiths around them that led to the destruction of the temple, as well as to their exile. Presumably, while in the very process of building the temple anew, the last thing that they would want to do would be to get too closely aligned with the people around them.

What else in these texts shows why this refusal was the right thing to do? See Ezra 4:4, 5.

Think about how easily they could have rationalized accepting this help. What does 2 Corinthians 6:14 have to say to us in this context?

Prophets Encourage

Unfortunately, the opposition that the Jews encountered from the surrounding nations, as described in Ezra 4–6, left them afraid and unwilling to work on the temple.

As mentioned before, Ezra 4:6–6:22 is not written in chronological order. Therefore, we will look at chapter 5 before chapter 4.

Read Ezra 5:1–5. Why does God send the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to the Jews? What is the result of their prophesying?

The Jews had stopped building because they were afraid. But God had sent them to Judah to rebuild the temple and the city, and He had a plan. Since they were afraid, He had to do something in order to encourage them. Therefore, He called two prophets to step in. Human opposition doesn't stop God; even if the Jews contributed to this opposition by their own actions, God did not abandon them. He worked through the prophets to motivate and propel them into action again.

Read Haggai 1. What is the message for them, and what can we take away from this for ourselves?

“The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were raised up to meet the crisis. In stirring testimonies these appointed messengers revealed to the people the cause of their troubles. The lack of temporal prosperity was the result of a neglect to put God's interests first, the prophets declared. Had the Israelites honored God, had they shown Him due respect and courtesy, by making the building of His house their first work, they would have invited His presence and blessing.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 573, 574.

Work Stoppage

What did the “enemies” do in Ezra 4:6–24 in order to stop the work in Jerusalem?

The “people of the land” wrote letters of accusation against the Jews and their work first to Darius (*Ezra 5 and 6*), then to King Xerxes (Ahasuerus), as well as Artaxerxes. They were doing everything in their power to stop the work in Jerusalem.

The people of the surrounding nations claimed that if the city were rebuilt, the king would lose his power over it, because Jerusalem had always been a place of rebellion and trouble in the past. Unfortunately, King Artaxerxes was swayed into believing that the Jews were building only because they wanted to gain their independence and therefore incite confrontation. He ordered the work to cease, and the people sent an army to prevent further building of the city. This forceful approach brought the work for God to a halt.

Read Ezra 4:23, 24. Why did the Jews stop building? Didn’t they know that God wanted them to rebuild the city? What got in the way?

It is apparent that the Jews realized that God had called them to rebuild the city and the temple, but because of the strong opposition, they were afraid. Perhaps they came up with such excuses as “Now must not be the right time,” or “If this were truly what God wanted us to do, He would have provided a way,” or “Maybe we weren’t supposed to come back here at all.” When opposition gets in the way of doing what we believe God calls us to do, we have the tendency to question and doubt God’s guidance. We can easily convince ourselves that we made a mistake. Fear can paralyze our minds, and our thoughts turn to despair and helplessness instead of being focused on the power of God.

Have you experienced something similar, being convinced that God had called you to do something and, then, harboring doubts when things got hard? (Think, for instance, about John the Baptist.) What have you learned from that experience?

Nehemiah Takes Action (444 B.C.)

Read Nehemiah 4. What did the Jews do under Nehemiah's leadership to stand up to opposition? Why was it important for them to prepare themselves to fight, rather than just do nothing, believing that God would protect them?

After starts and stops, the people began working again. The Jews prayed, and then Nehemiah set up an active guard. The people rotated through shifts during the day and nighttime in order to be prepared for any looming attacks. Nehemiah also organized the people around the wall with weapons so that each family was ready to fight. Additionally, he divided his servants into two groups, with one working and the other holding weapons. There also were special provisions for all those who worked on the wall, as they were closest to the danger. Each one of the builders held a sword with one hand and with the other added bricks or stones and mortar to the wall. They were prepared to face the opposition. They did their part; God did the rest. Nehemiah's faith in God's protection is inspiring. However, he didn't sit on the couch and expect God to do everything. They prepared by doing the best of their abilities.

The two passages "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses" (*see Neh. 4:13, 14, NKJV*) and "Our God will fight for us" (*see Neh. 4:19, 20, NKJV*) are some of the most inspirational statements found in the Bible.

The Jews could have stopped building once again because of the persistent opposition, but, this time, instead of being overcome by fear, they held on to the promise that God would fight for them. When we encounter opposition to the name of God, to our beliefs, or to what God calls us to do, we should remember that "God will fight for us."

In the end, the Jews realized that the Lord was behind what they were doing, and this gave them the courage to press on ahead.

Why is it so important to know that what you are doing is God's will? Thus, an important question to ask is: How do I know if what I am doing is God's will?

Doing a “Great Work”

Read Nehemiah 6:1–13. Why does Nehemiah see the work he is doing in Jerusalem as a “great work” (*Neh. 6:3*)? What were the attempts in this case to stop him?

Chapter 6 describes many attempts on Nehemiah’s life. Sanballat and Geshem kept sending Nehemiah letters in order to get him to come to them under the pretext of a meeting. However, the meeting was in the plain of Ono, which was in enemy territory, and thus gave away the true intent of the invitation. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem see a window of opportunity that will last only until the wall is finished and the gates are shut. The Jews have the protection of the Persian king, and therefore their enemies cannot conquer them through a full-frontal attack. But if they get rid of the leader, they will stunt the progress or perhaps even stop the Jews forever. They are not giving up. Even if Nehemiah is not responding, they keep trying. It must have been frustrating to Nehemiah to have to deal with opposition at every turn. He responds to them by stating, “I am doing a great work” (*Neh. 6:3, NKJV*).

By the world’s standards, Nehemiah was doing a great work as a cupbearer for the king, which was a prestigious occupation, one of the highest in the land where he served as an advisor to the king. But building a city that was in ruins, that had no apparent worldly significance? *That’s what he calls a great work?* Nehemiah considered the work for God as “great” and more important because he realized that the honor of God’s name was at stake in Jerusalem.

Also, when God set up the sanctuary services, He instituted the priesthood. In order to keep the sanctuary holy and special in the minds of the people, He allowed only the priests to perform the duties inside the temple. On our own, we have a hard time seeing the holiness of God; therefore, God made provision to help the Israelites come into the presence of God with reverence. Nehemiah knew that temple courts were for everyone, but not the inner rooms. By his words, about meeting inside the temple, Shemaiah not only shows himself to be a false prophet by suggesting something that was contrary to God’s directive, but he also exposes himself as a traitor.

What are ways that we, today, with no earthly sanctuary, can keep before us a sense of God’s holiness? How does the realization of God’s holiness, in contrast to our sinfulness, drive us to the cross?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Builders on the Wall,” “A Rebuke Against Extortion,” and “Heathen Plots,” pp. 635–660, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“The opposition and discouragement that the builders in Nehemiah’s day met from open enemies and pretended friends is typical of the experience that those today will have who work for God. Christians are tried, not only by the anger, contempt, and cruelty of enemies, but by the indolence, inconsistency, lukewarmness, and treachery of avowed friends and helpers.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 644.

“In Nehemiah’s firm devotion to the work of God, and his equally firm reliance on God, lay the reason of the failure of his enemies to draw him into their power. The soul that is indolent falls an easy prey to temptation; but in the life that has a noble aim, an absorbing purpose, evil finds little foothold. The faith of him who is constantly advancing does not weaken; for above, beneath, beyond, he recognizes Infinite Love, working out all things to accomplish His good purpose. God’s true servants work with a determination that will not fail because the throne of grace is their constant dependence.”—Page 660.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Put yourself in the position of Zerubbabel and Joshua and the other leaders when those men came to them with the offer of help. Looking back now, we can see that they did the right thing by not accepting that offer. As Adventists, how can we know when we should and should not collaborate with others not of our faith? How do we decide if it is right or wrong? What criteria can we follow?
- 2 All through biblical history we see the dangers of compromising our faith with the world. Indeed, the whole history of ancient Israel, right up to the Babylonian captivity, was a powerful example of this compromise. At the same time, what happens when people go to extremes in trying to avoid that danger? When Jesus Himself was accused of violating the Sabbath (see *John 9:14–16*), do we not have a powerful example of His accusers going to the other extreme? How do we find the right balance?

Money for Missionaries

By HORACIO RIZZO

The plan was ambitious: send 25 missionary couples from South America to share the gospel in the countries of the 10/40 window.

I listened intently as Erton Köhler, president of the South American Division, presented the “Missionaries to the World” initiative to 80 Seventh-day Adventist leaders from across South America at the division’s headquarters in Brazil’s capital, Brasilia, in 2014.

Pastor Köhler spoke about the challenges the Adventist Church has faced in the Middle East, and he mentioned a lack of financial and human resources. Our division could help by sending 25 married couples and covering all their expenses, including airfare, food, and insurance, for five-year terms. Pastor Köhler invited us to support the initiative financially. Each of us served as the president of a conference or mission in the South American Division. I was the president of the Central West Argentine Mission, a small territory with little money. We were dependent on the Argentina Union Conference to make ends meet.

Pastor Köhler suggested that our contribution be determined by how many members we had.

But not all conferences and missions have the same financial situation, I thought. Another problem was a difference between official church membership and the number who attend church regularly. In my mission, official membership was 10,000 people, but, in reality, only 5,000 members went to church every Sabbath.

I had to make a pledge. My heart pounded as I considered the issue. I knew the suggested contribution was high compared to the size of our budget. The mission treasurer was not with me to ask whether we could afford it. I didn’t have much time to weigh the matter. With a prayer of faith, I pledged to donate the suggested amount for a territory with 10,000 members. Then I texted the treasurer, “This is what we have to do.”

He immediately texted back, “OK.” He also wanted to support the project.

Two weeks later, a big surprise awaited me in my office. A member unexpectedly sold some property and returned a large tithe. The tithe amounted to three times more than the funds we had given to the division’s missionary initiative!

I firmly believe the first person who benefits from the act of giving is the giver. The South American Division’s missionary initiative ended up blessing church members in the Central West Argentine Mission most of all.



HORACIO RIZZO, left, served as president of the Central West Argentine Mission for nearly three years before being appointed president of River Plate Adventist University in Argentina in 2016. Three married couples who graduated from the university serve as missionaries in the “Missionaries to the World” initiative.