

Attacks on Ezra and Nehemiah



SABBATH—OCTOBER 19

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Ezra 4; Ezra 5; Nehemiah 4; Nehemiah 6.

MEMORY VERSE: “But God was watching over the Jewish leaders. The builders didn’t [did not] have to stop working until a report could be sent to King Darius. They continued working until the king sent his answer back” (Ezra 5:5, ERV).

GOD’S PEOPLE, the Jews, build again His temple. Leaders from countries near Judah tried to stop the Jews. In Ezra 3–6, we can read about the history of these attacks. These chapters show us an important idea. We learn about how people work against God. This idea is important for us to know. It helps us to understand better Ezra’s message in Ezra 3–6.

The first time we learn about Ezra is in Ezra 7:1. He arrives in Jerusalem in 457 B.C. After Ezra arrives, things change. The people start to build the city and its walls. But the work is slow. The people stop working many times. Thirteen years later, Nehemiah arrives. King Artaxerxes sends Nehemiah to Jerusalem in 444 B.C. The people start building the wall again. Many people try to stop the Jews. But God’s people finish the work in 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15).

As we said earlier, Ezra’s book shows us how people fight against God’s work. We see this idea in Nehemiah’s book too. So, we should not be surprised when the same thing happens today. Satan works hard to stop us from sharing the Good News. What can Ezra and Nehemiah teach us about what we should do when people attack God’s work?



Satan works hard to stop us from sharing the Good News.

THE FIGHTS START AGAINST GOD’S WORK (Ezra 4:1–5)

Read Ezra 4:1–5. In these verses, we read about leaders who want to help the Jews rebuild their temple. Why do you think the small group of Jews in Jerusalem refuses their help?

The leaders ask the Jews if they can help them build the city. Their offer seems very nice, right? But Ezra 4:1–5 give us a hint about what is really going on. Do you see that Ezra 4:2 says, “The **enemies** said, ‘We want to help you build’ ” (Ezra 4:2, NIV)? “Enemies”! That word alone gives us a powerful hint about why God’s people say “No”!

Why does the Bible name these people “enemies”? 2 Kings 17:24–41 explains. These people live in Samaria and the land around it. But they were not born in Samaria. So, they are not Jews. They come from other countries. They move to Samaria after the Assyrians take the people of Israel away. Then the King of Assyria sends Jewish holy leaders, or priests, to Samaria. The priests teach the people who moved there about the God of Israel. But the people also worship the Canaanite gods. So, the small group of Jews who now come back to Jerusalem are worried. They do not want this false religion in Samaria to become part of their worship in God’s temple. So, God’s people do the best thing they can. When the people from Samaria offer to help, the Jews say, “No, thanks.”



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What else in Ezra 4:4, 5 shows us why God’s people do the right thing?

Think about the many reasons that God’s people had for accepting help from their enemies. But they chose not to. How does 2 Corinthians 6:14 help us to understand that God’s people made the right decision?

GOD'S PROPHETS, OR SPECIAL MESSENGERS, ENCOURAGE HIS PEOPLE (Ezra 5:1–5)

The leaders from the countries around Jerusalem fight against God's work to build the temple. Sadly, God's people grow afraid. They stop building the temple. We can read about what happens in Ezra 4–6.

As we learned in lesson #1, the stories in Ezra 4:6–24 happen **after** the stories in Ezra 5 and Ezra 6, even if Ezra 4 comes first. If you remember this, it will help you not to get confused when you read. So, we will look at Ezra 5 before we look at Ezra 4.

Ezra 5:1–5 tells us that God sends Haggai and Zechariah to the Jews. These men are God's special messengers or prophets. Why does God send these prophets to His people? What happens when they give God's people their special messages? What do God's people do?

The Jews stop building because they are afraid. But God sent them to Judah to rebuild the temple and the city. Now God has another plan. He wants to do something to encourage His people. He wants to help them to stop being afraid. So, God sends two prophets to go to His people. Our enemies may stop us. But they do not stop God. Yes, the Jews do some things that made their problem worse. But God does not leave them. He works with His prophets to help His people start building again.

Read Haggai's message in Haggai 1. What does Haggai say to God's people? What message is there for us too?

"Haggai and Zechariah are prophets. God sends them to His people to help solve a big problem. Haggai and Zechariah give the people powerful messages from God. They show the people the cause of their troubles. The people do not have success in business because they do not put God first. The Israelites do not honor God. They do not show Him enough respect. The people do not put rebuilding God's house first in their lives. That is why God is not with His people. They do not have His blessing."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pages 573, 574, adapted.



"Haggai and Zechariah show the people the cause of their troubles. The people do not put rebuilding God's house first in their lives."

THE WORK STOPS (Ezra 4:6–24)

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

The people in the lands around Jerusalem write letters. First, they write to King Darius (Ezra 5 and 6). Then they write to King Xerxes. (Another name for Xerxes is Ahasuerus.) Finally, they write to King Artaxerxes. The letters accuse the Jews of causing trouble in the Persian Kingdom. God’s enemies do everything in their power to stop the work in Jerusalem.

The enemies warn that bad things will happen if the Jews build again their city. The Persian King will lose power over the city. The enemies ask the Persian King to remember all the trouble the Jews caused in the past. The enemies lie about the reason the Jews want to build again their city. They say it is because the Jews want to fight for their freedom from the Persian Kingdom. Sadly, King Artaxerxes believes these lies. He orders the work in Jerusalem to stop. God’s enemies send an army to Jerusalem. This army makes sure that no one builds the city. God’s work stops.



God’s enemies write a letter to King Artaxerxes. They accuse the Jews of causing trouble in Persia.

Why do the Jews stop building? They know that God wants them to rebuild the city, right? So, what gets in their way? Read Ezra 4:23, 24 for the answers.

It is clear that the Jews believe that God sent them to Jerusalem to build the city and the temple. But they grow afraid when their enemies try to stop the work. Maybe the Jews make excuses about why they should stop. Maybe they say, “Now must not be the right time.” Or, “Is this really what God wants us to do? If so, why are all these bad things happening?” Or “Maybe God did not want us to come back home at all.” Have you ever felt this way? It is easy to think this same way when bad things happen. We start to doubt God’s leading in our lives. It is easy to believe we made a mistake. Fear can keep us from working. Our thoughts become sad. We feel helpless. But that is the time when we need to remember the power of God.

Have you ever felt God chose you to do special work? But did you doubt He chose you when things got hard? What did you learn from that experience?

NEHEMIAH TAKES ACTION (Nehemiah 4)

Read Nehemiah 4. In this chapter, what does Nehemiah tell the Jews to do? Do they believe they do not need to do anything because God will protect them? If not, then how do God’s people fight against the attacks? Why is it important for them to get ready to fight? Why is that better than their doing nothing?

After many stops and starts, God’s people start working again. The Jews pray. Then Nehemiah picks men to protect the people. These guards take turns protecting God’s people during the day and at night. The guards are ready for any attacks. Nehemiah also puts people around the wall with weapons. Now each family in Jerusalem is ready to fight too. Then Nehemiah divides his servants into two groups. One group builds. The other group holds weapons. Nehemiah also makes sure that the builders on the wall are safe. They are closest to the danger. So, each builder carries a sword in one hand. With his other hand, he adds bricks or stones to the wall. In this way, the builders are ready for any attacks. The people do their part. God does the rest. Nehemiah’s faith in God gives God’s people courage. Do you see that Nehemiah does not sit on the couch and expect God to do everything? He gets the people ready as best as he can.

There are two sets of verses in Nehemiah that fill our hearts with courage and hope: “ ‘Don’t [do not] be afraid of our enemies. Remember the Lord, who is great [mighty] and powerful! You must fight for your brothers, your sons, and your daughters! You must fight for your wives and your homes!’ ” (Nehemiah 4:14, ERV). And “ ‘Our God will fight for us’ ” (Nehemiah 4:20, ERV). These verses are some of the most powerful verses in the Bible.

Yes, the Jews can choose to stop building again because of the attacks. But they are no longer afraid. Now they trust in the promise that God will fight for them. Remember this promise when someone attacks you because of your beliefs or for doing God’s work. God will fight for you.

In the end, the Jews believe that the Lord is with them. Their faith gives them the courage to keep working.

Why is it so important for us to know that we are following God’s plan for our lives? How can we know?



Each builder carries a sword in one hand. With his other hand, he adds bricks or stones to the wall.

AN “IMPORTANT WORK” (Nehemiah 6:1–13)

Read Nehemiah 6:1–13. Why does Nehemiah see the work he does in Jerusalem as “ ‘important work’ ” (Nehemiah 6:3, ERV)? What do God’s enemies do to stop him?

Nehemiah 6 tells us that God’s enemies try to kill Nehemiah several times. Sanballat and Geshem, God’s enemies, send Nehemiah many letters. They say they want Nehemiah to meet with them. But that is a lie. How do we know? Because they want to meet with Nehemiah in the Plain of Ono. That is in the land of God’s enemies. So, the spot they pick clearly shows Nehemiah what they want to do. They invite Nehemiah there to kill him. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem feel that they have to act fast. Soon, the Jews will finish building the wall. Then the gates will be shut. God’s enemies will not have a chance to stop the Jews after that happens. Also, the Persian King protects the Jews. So, God’s enemies cannot attack the Jews out in the open. But if they can get rid of Nehemiah, the leader of God’s people, then maybe God’s enemies can stop the Jews forever. God’s enemies do not give up. Even if Nehemiah does not answer their letters, they keep writing to him. Nehemiah sends messengers to the enemies saying, “ ‘I am doing important work. . . . I don’t [do not] want the work to stop just so I can come down and meet with you’ ” (Nehemiah 6:3, ERV).

In human eyes, Nehemiah already does important work for the king. Nehemiah, you will remember, is the king’s cupbearer. A cupbearer tastes the king’s drinks to make sure they are safe for the king to drink. This job is one of the most important jobs in the land. Nehemiah also gives advice to the king. That is very important work! But building a city that is destroyed? How can that be important work? Nehemiah does not think the way other people think. He feels that the work he does for God is more important than anything else he can do.

During the time that Nehemiah works for God, a man named Shemaiah wants to meet with Nehemiah. Shemaiah tells Nehemiah to meet him inside God’s temple. The inside of God’s temple is very holy. Only priests, or holy leaders, can go there. So, Shemaiah shows he is a false prophet, or messenger. God never sends a messenger to tell His people to do something that He said they should not do. Shemaiah’s words show us that his heart is evil.



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

“The builders in Nehemiah’s day face attacks from enemies and from people who say they are friends. The builders lose courage and stop working. Today, we who work for God often will feel the same way. God tests Christians. Yes, they are tested by the anger, hate, and mean spirits of their enemies. But they also are tested by people who say they are their friends but are not. These friends are lazy. They do not always do what they say they will do. They do not care about helping God’s people. We cannot trust them.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 644, adapted.

“Why do Nehemiah’s enemies fail to beat Nehemiah? Nehemiah is firm in his decision to serve God. Nehemiah trusts fully in God. A lazy person is led into sin easily. But not the person who lives to honor God. Evil will have little power over him. The person who grows in faith day by day does not grow weak. He sees God’s everlasting love working in all things. God’s true servants work with firm hearts and minds. They will not fail. They always go to God’s throne for help. They depend fully on God’s grace, or loving-favor.”—Page 660, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① It is easy to see that Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the other leaders make the right choice. They do not accept the offer of help from their enemies. As Adventists, how do we know when we should or should not work with people who do not belong to our church or share our faith? How do we know if we are making the right choice? What important Bible rules can help guide us?
- ② The study of Bible history shows us the danger we will be in when we give up our beliefs. People often stop doing what they know is right so that they can get riches, power, or fame. Sadly, the whole history of Israel shows us this is true. What Bible truths can we follow to help us not make Israel’s same mistakes? What will help us stay true to our beliefs?



**“God’s true servants
always go to God’s throne
for help.”**