

# 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*).

**E**zra 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?

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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.

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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?

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## 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?

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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 God's people, and what can we take away from this for ourselves?

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“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?

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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?

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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?**

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## 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?

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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?**

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## 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?

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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?

## ***Part I: Overview***

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**Key Texts:** *Ezra 5:5, Nehemiah 4:20*

**Study Focus:** *Ezra 4:4–24; Ezra 5; Ezra 6 (see also Nehemiah 3, Nehemiah 4, and Nehemiah 6:1–13 for a complete picture); Daniel 10:12, 13, 20*

This lesson expands on the stories of opposition that each group of returnees faced while rebuilding the temple, the city, and the walls, first during the time of the governor Zerubbabel, then Ezra, the priest, and finally with the governor Nehemiah. Although the stories are not always written in chronological order (some parts of the book are put together thematically), we can piece together the sequence of events based on the kings who are addressed in each letter and the complaint against the Jews.

Despite the fact that work stopped several times because people were afraid of threats from the surrounding nations or kings and lost faith in God's protection, the Lord always sent leaders who encouraged the people to build again. At times, there were several years before a project was continued, but it was not abandoned indefinitely. God wanted the Israelites to return to the Promised Land and was with them despite the opposition, humiliation, and, at times, violence against them. Just because something is difficult does not mean that God did not call us to do it. God asks big things from ordinary people, and then He Himself provides what we need to make them happen. In Ezra and Nehemiah, God inspired leaders and prophets to stand strong against hostility.

God always looks for people of faith who trust Him in spite of complicated circumstances so He can intervene in their favor and do His work. God rewards collaboration, willingness to go forward, and determination to fulfill His given task.

## ***Part II: Commentary***

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### **Chronology of the Work in Ezra**

#### *Under Governor Zerubbabel*

- 537–535 B.C.—rebuilding the temple's altar and foundations (*Ezra 3*)
- 535–520 B.C.—work abandoned due to strong opposition (*Ezra 4–6*)
- 520–515 B.C.—work reinstated under prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah
- 515 B.C.—temple completed (*Ezra 6:13–22*)

*Before Ezra*

- 465–464 B.C.—opposition to rebuilding Jerusalem (*Ezra 4:7–23*)—Artaxerxes stops the work in his early years

*Ezra*

- 457 B.C.—Ezra arrives in Jerusalem (*Ezra 7*) while work is stopped

Ezra 3 mentions the rebuilding of the temple's altar and the foundations, which took place in 537–535 B.C. as the result of Cyrus's edict (*Ezra 1:1–2:70*). After an initial celebration (*Ezra 3:10–13*), the work was abandoned (*Ezra 4:1–5*) because of strong opposition, which began around 535 B.C. and lasted until 520 B.C. (*for details, see Ezra 4:24 to 6:12*). Ezra 4:6 briefly describes the opposition to building under Xerxes (486–465 B.C.). Then in *Ezra 4:7–23*, we read of the opposition during the early reign of King Artaxerxes. Ezra includes copies of the letters that were sent to both kings Artaxerxes and Darius. The letters are inserted in Aramaic while the rest of the book is written in Hebrew, which means that these were official documents preserved in the language that was used for public documents at that time. (Aramaic was the universal language at that time, just as English is today.) In 520 B.C., after 15 years of vigorous opposition, the prophet Haggai stirred up the people to continue building the temple (read his five short, powerful sermons in the book of Haggai). The prophet Zechariah joined in support, resulting in the completion of the temple in less than five years and its dedication in March of 515 B.C. (*Ezra 6:13–18*), followed by the celebration of the Passover one month later (*Ezra 6:19–22*).

**Daniel 10:12, 13, 20**

God prepared everything for God's people to be able to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem after their return from Babylonian exile. He personally engaged to stop hindrances and open the way for this godly activity. According to Daniel 10, the angel Gabriel and Michael (another name for Jesus Christ) were fighting for the minds of the Persian kings, namely, Cyrus and his son Cambyses, to persuade them to advance the rebuilding program when Israel's jealous local enemies enticed these rulers to terminate the restoration work on the temple. God was fighting with these princes to stir up their minds in favor of granting God's people a place to worship the living Lord. It is sad that the Jews were discouraged and stopped working at this time even though God with His might was on their side. The work was resumed when the prophet Haggai appeared on the scene.

This situation also warns us against a lack of faith and cowardice in not following God's leadership when He prepares a way for us to move forward to do His will. However, God's providence always works better than our best calculations or plans. But we need to trust His guidance and follow His lead. We can be assured that His plans and directions are the best, and He always has our prosperity in mind.

### Haggai and Zechariah

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah arrive on the scene after 15 long years of opposition to building. The people have become discouraged and stop working on the reconstruction of the temple. God called and directed these prophets to speak to the people in order to inspire them to build in spite of the hostile opposition. God encouraged them not to be afraid. He was with them, and His presence would sustain them.

God approached the people with the inquiry: “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?” (*Hag. 1:4, NKJV*). Study all the instances the word for paneled (*safun*) occurs in the Bible in terms of building projects, and you will see something interesting. All those examples are connected with cedar (*1 Kings 6:9, 1 Kings 7:3, 1 Kings 7:7, Jer. 22:14*). Thus, God called His people’s houses (*Hag. 1:4*) “paneled” because they were not made of material normally used in that region. What was the problem with cedar logs? Originally, the Jews ordered cedar logs from Lebanon in order to rebuild the temple. The temple was to be constructed according to the model that Solomon set forth by interlaying stone blocks and wooden panels of cedar. They planned to use the cedar logs for the temple’s panels. However, when the opposition “forced” them to stop working on the temple, they had wood lying around. Why not use it? Even though they used the wood meant for His temple for their own houses, God came up with another solution. He sent them to the mountains to bring wood from there and build His house. God does not require the most expensive materials for His own house. Rather, He just wants a house so He can dwell with them.

Most important, God wanted His people to desire His presence to be with them, which was the purpose of the temple. The bigger problem was their uncommitted hearts—the uncompleted temple was just the symptom of their apathy. When someone is committed to a task or to another person, he or she will not be easily stopped by opposition. The lack of work displayed the lack of commitment on the part of God’s people to Him. And yet, the encouragement from God woke the people up from their lethargy and fear and motivated them to again start the work on the temple. After that, they did not waver in their work. They finished the temple five years later. Sometimes we get bogged down by the mundane and the comfortable. What we need then is a reminder of what is important in life.

### Chronology of the Work in Nehemiah

- 445/444 B.C.—Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (*Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah 2*).
- Work opposed (*Neh. 2:11–20, Neh. 4:1–23, Neh. 6:1–14*)
- After 52 days (less than two months) the wall is completed (*Neh. 6:15–19*).

**Nehemiah 4**

Sanballat, who along with Tobiah controlled Samaria north of Judah, threatened Nehemiah and turned to mockery and ridicule of the Jews. He was related to the Jews through the lineage of the high priest (by way of marriage) and therefore could sense that his power over the Jewish nation would be curbed once they restored the wall. He believed that the Jews were not strong enough, that they were inferior, and their task was far too big for them. The Jews could never rebuild the wall, he said. Other leaders in the region joined Sanballat in a political coup to stop the Israelites. The Arabs were under the leadership of Geshem and occupied the southern territory below Judah; the Ammonites lived in the east in Persian territory; and Ashdod was west of Judah. Thus, Judah was completely surrounded by hostile forces. While the people of Israel became afraid, Nehemiah took it as an affront to God and the Jewish nation. God's name and the Israelite name were shamed by the enemies, and so he cried out to God to "hear" and to "turn their reproach on their own heads" (*Neh. 4:4, NKJV*). He did not retaliate himself but asked God to take the matter into His hands. Nehemiah was sure that God had directed him to lead in rebuilding the wall, as evidenced by the favorable response of the king, as well as the people of Israel. Because the menacing words of their neighbors played with their imagination and made them afraid, Nehemiah encouraged the people to "fight," because God is "great and awesome" (*Neh. 4:14, NKJV*), and He "will fight for us" (*Neh. 4:20, NKJV*). Nehemiah assembled the Jews and put groups of them in full battle dress at each gap in the wall, which allowed their enemies to see them. He was demonstrating to the world that they were ready for an attack.

The strategy worked; the enemies' plans were thwarted. The Jews were reminded to trust in God and not let human enemies appear bigger than their God. Despite a few other threats toward the Israelites, they continued building until the wall was finished in a mere 52 days of work (*Neh. 6:15*).

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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The pattern of working and stopping, working and stopping, again and again was a result of the fear of what people would do to them. Enemy threats, kings' decrees forbidding the work, and their small number all conspired to cause them to cease from their work.

- 1. What did the prophet Haggai do to motivate people so that they successfully worked together on the rebuilding of the temple?**

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2. What happens when we play again and again what could happen in our minds? It only makes things worse, doesn't it? We worry ourselves sick until the outcome becomes so horrendous that our expectations and imagination keep us from trusting God and moving forward. Obstacles loom larger than life, and we forget that God promises to "fight for us." How can we be like Nehemiah instead and cultivate a strong faith that God, indeed, will be with us?

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3. What leadership qualities can we learn from Nehemiah as we encourage people around us?

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4. What kind of factors have made you afraid and prevented you from doing God's work?

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5. What can you do to encourage those who, mired in the difficulties of life, fear the challenges confronting them and have trouble trusting that the Lord "will fight for them"?

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