

Ezra and Nehemiah Facing Opposition

Lesson #4 for October 26, 2019

Scriptures: Ezra 4; 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Haggai 1; Nehemiah 4; 6:1-13.

1. In this lesson we will discuss two major building projects that the people of Israel who had returned from captivity in Babylon and Medo-Persia were involved in at different times.
2. The first group of returnees under Governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua/Jeshua started rebuilding the temple in 537 B.C. However, there were major obstacles.
 - 537-535 B.C.-Started rebuilding the temple's altar and foundations. (Ezra 3)
 - 535-520 B.C.-Work was abandoned due to strong opposition. (Ezra 4-6)
 - 520-515 B.C.-Work was restarted under the leadership of Haggai and Zechariah.
 - 515 B.C.-Temple construction was completed. (Ezra 6:13-22)
3. Fifty years passed. During that time, the Jews were threatened with annihilation because of what happened during the days of Esther and Mordecai. Finally, in 465 B.C., the children of Israel began to attempt to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem.
4. Before Ezra:
 - 465-464 B.C.-There was opposition to rebuilding Jerusalem. (Ezra 4:7-23) Artaxerxes stopped the work in his early years.
5. Then, Ezra, working with permission from King Artaxerxes, returned to Jerusalem with a small group of 5000-7000 and restarted the building of the wall.
6. 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*).—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 53.† [Italic type is in the source.]‡
7. It is important to note that while Hebrew was used by Ezra and perhaps by Nehemiah in their

writing, the language of the Jews from the time of the Babylonian captivity until after the days of Jesus was Aramaic, not Hebrew. Aramaic was the native language of Jesus.

8. It should be clear from these paragraphs that Ezra 3-6 is not organized chronologically. In fact, the name of Ezra is not mentioned until Ezra 7:1 when his genealogy starts.
9. The Jews were surrounded by enemies who were determined to prevent them from redeveloping a correct worship in the temple and, later, were determined to prevent them from building the wall around the city.

Ezra 4:1-5: ⁴ The **enemies** of the people of Judah and Benjamin heard that those who had returned from exile were rebuilding the Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel. ²So they went to see Zerubbabel and the heads of the clans and said, **“Let us join you in building the Temple. We worship the same God you worship, and we have been offering sacrifices to him ever since Esarhaddon, emperor of Assyria, sent us here to live.”**

³ Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the heads of the clans said to them, **“We don’t need your help to build a temple for the LORD our God. We will build it ourselves, just as Cyrus, emperor of Persia, commanded us.”**

⁴ Then the people who had been living in the land tried to discourage and frighten the Jews and keep them from building. ⁵They also bribed Persian government officials to work against them. They kept on doing this throughout the reign of Cyrus and into the reign of Darius.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Ezra 4:1–5). New York: American Bible Society.†

10. In order to understand the position of these enemies or adversaries of the Jews, it is necessary to read 2 Kings 17:5-41. The people of the northern kingdom of Israel continuously rebelled against God until God allowed them to be conquered by the Assyrians and scattered throughout the Assyrian territory. Although the people who were brought in by the Assyrians to take the place of the Israelites living in and around Samaria professed to worship the true God, their worship mixed in a lot of pagan traditions and customs.
11. From the time Jeroboam rebelled against Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, the history of Israel was filled with pagan inroads and opposition from surrounding nations. The last thing that the Jews needed was to have their temple in Jerusalem be used for pagan ceremonies or pagan worship alongside the worship of *Yahweh*.
12. It is clear from Ezra 4:4-5 that these people were not sincerely wanting to assist in the worship of the true God; they were known as adversaries from the beginning. Later, they did everything they could to stop or slow the work of the temple as well as the city wall.
13. We have been warned in 2 Corinthians 6:14, that we should not try to work together as equals with unbelievers. How should we apply that advice in our day?
14. Read Ezra 5:1-5. Imagine returning from Babylon or Persia to Jerusalem and finding nothing left of the city but a heap of rubble. The returned exiles tried to rebuild the temple but faced fierce opposition. In a couple years, the effort ceased.
15. Fortunately, two prophets arose under God’s direction to inspire them to rebuild the temple. Haggai and Zechariah were a wonderful inspiration to the people. Read Haggai 1. It is clear that the people had managed to find materials for building their own houses and making them very nice. But, somehow, they chose to ignore rebuilding the temple of God.

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** 573.3-574.0.

16. Many years later during the reign of Artaxerxes the emperor of Medo-Persia, the people living in Judah began to work on the wall. But, their enemies managed to write a letter to Emperor Artaxerxes and get the work stopped again. Clearly, their enemies were doing everything they could to prevent the Jews from reestablishing themselves in their territory.
17. It is interesting to note that King Artaxerxes was initially convinced to write a letter forbidding the Jews to rebuild. Later, under Ezra and Nehemiah, that same emperor gave them the permission that finally allowed them to succeed in rebuilding the wall. What do you suppose convinced Artaxerxes to change his mind? Did he remember about the letter he had written previously? Did God influence him unduly? Did Ezra and Nehemiah convince him?
18. Then, as today, under opposition like what we have seen so far in the rebuilding of the temple and the wall, it would have been very easy just to have given up. All kinds of excuses could have been given. How many times have Seventh-day Adventists started out to do certain projects and run into opposition? Has that ever happened to us personally?
19. Thirteen years after Ezra arrived back in Judah and had tried to get the building of the wall going again, Nehemiah arrived and began to take action.
20. Read Nehemiah 2:7-20. Nehemiah felt that his success in getting permission from the emperor and arriving safely in Jerusalem was a sufficient reason to believe that God was behind the rebuilding project. But, he did not leave anything to chance. After he had been in the city only three days, he made that secret trip at night around the walls of Jerusalem with a few very carefully selected friends. Then, he stood up before the Jewish people and spelled out what he thought should be done. The fact that he had done his homework and could speak with accuracy about what needed to be done inspired the people; they responded, saying, "Let's rebuild."
21. As you might guess, their enemies arrived almost immediately and started by making fun of them. See Nehemiah 4:1-3. But, Nehemiah did not allow that to discourage him or the people. They went on rebuilding the wall until they got the wall up to half of its full height.
22. This, of course, made their enemies very angry. They plotted to attack the Jews and destroy them. But, repeatedly, Jews living among those enemies warned the Jews in advance of their enemies' plans, and they prevented a disaster.
23. Eventually, it became necessary for the people building the wall to arm themselves with swords, spears, bows, and armor. Sometimes, one person had to hold the weapons while another person worked.
24. Nehemiah even developed an alarm system. The priests from the temple had ram's horn bugles that they used for worship services. Some of those priests were placed around the city wall in various places and told that if an attack came, they were to blow their bugles as loud as possible. Then, Nehemiah along with another bugler would rush to that area and would further call people to that area if necessary.
25. A number of the people working on the wall did not live inside the city. They came from surrounding villages. Nehemiah recognized that this placed them at significant danger. So, he told them that they must remain in Jerusalem until the wall was finished. He personally

stated that he did not take off his clothes, even at night; neither did any of his companions nor his servants nor his bodyguard. They all kept weapons handy. (Nehemiah 4:22-23)

26. Nehemiah's faith, which, in turn, was supported by Ezra's faith, inspired the people to believe that God was behind the project. But, they did not just sit back and wait for God to solve the problems for them.
27. It is important to realize that almost the entire population of Jews in and around Jerusalem willingly engaged in this work. What would happen if most of the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church would take seriously the task of finishing the gospel in our day?
28. See Nehemiah 4:13-14, 19-20 (NKJV*). "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." "Our God will fight for us." If you were certain that described your condition, would you have been inspired to work on the wall even at the risk of your life?
29. The Jews had been stopped many times from building; but, this time, they could not be stopped. They were certain that God had called them to rebuild the wall. What criteria do you use in determining if what you are doing is God's will? What if you are directly following the advice given in Scripture? (See 5T 512.)
30. As completion of the wall drew near, the enemies of the Jews became desperate.
31. Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and others of their enemies decided that they should try to call Nehemiah down to the plain of Ono in enemy territory to discuss issues. Fortunately, Nehemiah recognized immediately that was going to be an attempt to kill him. Four times they repeated this message. Each time, he sent the same reply: "I am doing important work and can't go down there. I am not going to let the work stop just to go and see you." (Nehemiah 6:3, GNB*) Finally, Sanballat sent an open letter trying to force Nehemiah to come and meet.

Nehemiah 6:6-8: ⁶It read:

"Geshem tells me that a rumour is going round among the neighbouring peoples that you and the Jewish people intend to revolt and that this is why you are rebuilding the wall. He also says you plan to make yourself king ⁷ and that you have arranged for some prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem that you are the king of Judah. His Majesty is certain to hear about this, so I suggest that you and I meet to talk the situation over."

⁸ I sent a reply to him: "Nothing of what you are saying is true. You have made it all up yourself."—*Good News Bible*.*

32. Nehemiah knew that this was only an attempt to try to stop the work and to destroy him. He flatly denied all of the charges.
33. His enemies even managed to get someone who lived inside Jerusalem to call Nehemiah to his side and try to hide in the temple for fear that he might be killed. Nehemiah was not a Levite; only the priests were supposed to occupy buildings and rooms inside the temple. So, once again, Nehemiah refused.
34. How did a cupbearer and a wine taster for the emperor develop the skills and faith he needed to carry out this work? For four months, he had fasted and prayed for God's help.
35. At the end of this world's history when Satan comes pretending to be Christ, he will give away his true identity by claiming that he has changed the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday. Will he also make other false claims? Do we know the Bible well enough so that we will not be deceived by his false claims?

36. How can we know clearly what God's will is for us? Don't we have clear evidence that our overall task is to finish carrying the gospel to the world? How are we doing at that?
37. What kinds of opposition are we facing today?

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 644.3.†**

Satan's assaults have ever been directed against those who have sought to advance the work and cause of God. Though often baffled, he as often renews his attacks with fresh vigor, using means hitherto untried. But it is his secret working through those who avow themselves the friends of God's work, that is most to be feared. **Open opposition may be fierce and cruel, but it is fraught with far less peril to God's cause than is the secret enmity of those who, while professing to serve God, are at heart the servants of Satan. These have it in their power to place every advantage in the hands of those who will use their knowledge to hinder the work of God and injure His servants.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 658.2.†**

As the storm approaches, a large class who have professed faith in the third angel's message, but have not been sanctified through obedience to the truth, abandon their position and join the ranks of the opposition. By uniting with the world and partaking of its spirit, they have come to view matters in nearly the same light; and when the test is brought, they are prepared to choose the easy, popular side. **Men of talent and pleasing address, who once rejoiced in the truth, employ their powers to deceive and mislead souls. They become the most bitter enemies of their former brethren. When Sabbathkeepers are brought before the courts to answer for their faith, these apostates are the most efficient agents of Satan to misrepresent and accuse them, and by false reports and insinuations to stir up the rulers against them.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy** 608.2.†**

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.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 660.2; *CC** 268.4.

38. There are other organizations including religious groups in our day who seem to be doing good works of various kinds. Should we try to cooperate with them? Suppose one of those groups should ask us to do so, how would we decide if that was the right thing to do?
39. Does this advice also apply to the many "offshoots" of Adventism? How are we to determine if a group bringing a new message is really promoting the work of God? Or, if it is just another "offshoot"?

40. Sometimes, the enemies of God are on our side of the fence! Think of the Pharisees in Jesus's day.
41. Read John 9:14-16. Their religious practices were so rigid that they wanted to kill Jesus because He healed a man on the Sabbath! So, how can we maintain a correct balance?
42. Many different people are named in Nehemiah 3&4 as people who helped to rebuild the wall. Some of them had larger sections to work on; others, smaller sections. Some were repairing portions of the wall right next to their homes. Others were repairing sections of the wall far away from where they lived.
43. How was Satan involved in this whole story? Read Daniel 10:12-14,20-21. It might be helpful to read this passage in several different translations if they are available. Clearly, Daniel was told that the Devil would do everything he possibly could to prevent the successful reestablishment of the Jewish people back in their homeland. Gabriel and Christ Himself came to the aid of the Jewish people in that process.
44. Is this a case of God using excessive force? Not at all! Satan is the one who was trying to use excessive force to stop the work. Gabriel and Christ were only there to prevent Satan from forcing the various emperors and other leaders to do Satan's will. Thus, God gave those leaders an opportunity to exercise their free will in making the decisions that they did.
45. How do you think you would have fit into this story spread over 70 years? Would you have had the courage to put your life on the line when you thought God was behind the project? We are told clearly that the most difficult time ever for God's people to face is still in front of us. Are we prepared? You may feel that you are just an ordinary person and you do not have the necessary skills to undertake such a task; but, God is with you.

Our Saviour did not ignore learning or despise education, yet **He chose unlearned fishermen for the work of the gospel because they had not been schooled in the false customs and traditions of the world.** They were men of good natural ability and of a humble, teachable spirit, men whom He could educate for His great work. **In the ordinary walks of life there is many a man patiently treading the round of daily toil, all unconscious that he possesses power which if called into action would raise him to an equality with the world's most honored men. The touch of a skillful hand is needed to arouse and develop those dormant faculties. It was such men whom Jesus connected with Himself, and He gave them the advantages of three years' training under His own care.** No course of study in the schools of the rabbis or the halls of philosophy could have equaled this in value. **The Son of God was the greatest educator the world ever knew.**—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* September 25, 1883, par. 3; *That I May Know Him** 189.3.† Compare CE 203.3.

46. So, unless you try, how do you know if you are the kind of person that God can use? God has given gifts to every person. Some have one kind of gift; others have other gifts; but, if we are using our gifts according to God's plan, He will give us additional gifts. Surely, the finishing of the gospel is an important enough task for every Seventh-day Adventist to do what he can to accomplish it. Are we ready to start?

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