

## 26.10.2019 FACING OPPOSITION

***“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***

God’s work continued as many Jews took advantage of Cyrus’ decree. *“Every one whose spirit God had stirred”* prepared to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5). When they arrived in Jerusalem, their first job was to build the altar and offer sacrifices on it (Ezra 3:1-3). Worship and work go hand in hand through the pages of Ezra and Nehemiah.

When we study the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we see that whenever God’s people say, “Let us arise and build,” their enemies say, “Let us arise and oppose.” This has been the Devil’s *modus operandi* in all ages. But though opposition was intense, the work of God prospered. When Nehemiah started the work of rebuilding the walls, the work was completed in 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15).

Whenever God’s people seek to restore and reform that which has been destroyed, they will find like Ezra and Nehemiah did, that opposition first arises from without – from our enemies, those who scorn the gospel and do not believe it. Later, opposition arises from the ‘mixed multitude’, those within the church with divided hearts; in the New Testament they are called carnal or worldly Christians.

**The only way to face opposition is to be certain of the task we are called to and persist in it, without stopping to make excuses or defence. That was what Jesus did; He set His face like a flint to finish the work His father had sent Him to do, and He ‘opened not His mouth’ but committed Himself to His Father (Isaiah 53:7, 1 Peter 2:23).**

Today we are not called to rebuild and restore the city of Jerusalem in Israel. But God’s people in these end times are called to restore true worship of God *“whom you worship, you will serve”*, to proclaim the true gospel and to make our hearts, our homes and God’s church a place of praise and salvation and separation from the world. We have a vital message, for we are called to restore the true gospel; to be the people who *‘repair the breach and restore the waste places’*.

This work Satan will bitterly oppose. From the story of Ezra and Nehemiah we learn lessons on how to face opposition. We are also reminded that in our own strength and strategies, we will have no permanent success. Our only hope of overcoming Satan lies in living in a constant faith relationship with Christ, who has won the ultimate victory over Satan.

*“This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith” 1 John 5:4*

### **Opposition Begins to the Building of the Temple during the time of Zerubbabel**

*Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the Lord God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers’ houses, and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.” But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers’ houses of Israel said to them, “You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.” Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. Ezra 4:1-5*

Here we meet the opposition; note the characteristics of the opposition:

1. They were enemies of Judah. (4:1)
2. They came with false assurances of friendship and support...*‘let us build with you’*

3. They claimed to be true worshippers of Jehovah – but history showed this to be patently untrue. When the enemies of God defeated God's people, they would populate the territory with heathen peoples. These peoples, because they feared (were afraid of) Jehovah, would pay lip service to Him, but would also continue in the worship of the gods they had brought from their countries. This is well described in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 17 after the defeat of the northern kingdom of Israel.

*Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities. And it was so, at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they did not fear the Lord...then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, "Send there one of the priests whom you brought from there; let him go and dwell there, and let him teach them the rituals of the God of the land." Then one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the Lord.*

*However every nation continued to make gods of its own, and put them in the shrines on the high places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities where they dwelt. The men of Babylon made Succoth Benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, and the Avites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites burned their children in fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. So they feared the Lord, and from every class they appointed for themselves priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. **They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods...** to this day they continue practicing the former rituals; they do not fear the Lord, nor do they follow their statutes or their ordinances, or the law and commandment which the Lord had commanded the children of Jacob... **So these nations feared the Lord, yet served their carved images;** also their children and their children's children have continued doing as their fathers did, even to this day. 2 Kings 17: 24-25, 29-33, 41.*

Ezra 4:9, 10 describes the peoples/nations who opposed the building of the walls of Jerusalem. They were the new colonists, but their attitude was very similar to the peoples who had colonised Samaria earlier.

*From Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions—representatives of the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the people of Persia and Erech and Babylon and Shushan, the Dehavites, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnapper took captive and settled in the cities of Samaria and the remainder beyond the River—and so forth...*

**God will have nothing to do with a divided heart. He will not accept the worship of a divided heart. We are to have no strange gods among us. In the Bible, God calls his people perfect when they follow him with an undivided heart.**

*"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:4, 5*

*You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. 1 Corinthians 10:21*

*"You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, "And My servant whom I have chosen, So that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He Before Me there was no God formed, And there will be none after Me. "I, even I, am the LORD, And there is no saviour besides Me. "It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed, And there was no strange god among you; So you are My witnesses," declares the LORD, "And I am God. Isaiah 46:10-12*

*"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. Matthew 6:24*

*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit...So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Romans 8:5, 6*

4. The Jews recognised the motives of the enemy despite their smooth words...*"You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."*

It is easy to be deceived by the flattering words of Satan and his agents. We are also tempted to get help from the world (our enemy) because it offers to help us. We need daily to walk with the Holy Spirit so He will reveal to us the crafty words of the enemy.

*Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left. Isaiah 30:21*

5. When the exiles refused their help, they showed their true colours...*' the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia'.*

Satan often shows us a friendly face as he did to Eve in the Garden of Eden. But Jesus has warned us that he was a liar, a deceiver and a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). His agents will have the same spirit. If we refuse their friendly overtures, they will then become our obvious and implacable enemies.

If you study the names of the enemies of the Jews, you will see that they had suddenly united against God's people. Their history shows that they had warred against each other in the past. But now, they unite to fight against God's people. Satan always unites his agents against God's people. At Jesus' trial, the Jews, implacable enemies of Rome, united with the Romans, to crucify Jesus.

*That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other. Luke 23:12*

## **Prophets Encourage**

The people became discouraged and stopped work after the foundations of the Temple were built. They concentrated on building their homes and setting up their community. Sixteen years after their return God sent a message through Haggai and Zechariah that He is displeased with His people. Haggai exhorts the people and points out to them that their physical poverty has a direct relationship to their unfaithfulness in fulfilling God's purpose. Herein lies a great lesson – we will never prosper in wealth if we neglect the things of God and refuse to be generous for His cause.

*In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, "Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, and this [a]temple to lie in ruins?" Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: "Consider your ways!" Haggai 1:1-5*

*Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared the presence of the Lord. Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, spoke the Lord's message to the people, saying, "I am with you, says the Lord." So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month, in the second year of King Darius. Haggai 1:12-15*

## Work Stoppage during the time of Ezra

The enemies of Judah send a message to Darius I that the Jews are restoring the temple and building the walls.

Nevertheless, the Jews continued their work until they received a reply from the King.

*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. Ezra 5:5*

Later, another complaint was made to King Ahasuerus and to King Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:4-24). This time the king gave a command for building in Jerusalem to cease. The enemies of Judah used force to make them stop building. When the enemies of God's people do not succeed through deception and flattery, they resort to force.

*Now when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem against the Jews, and by force of arms made them cease. Ezra 4:23*

This is typical of the Devil's work in the last days. When he does not succeed by deception (Revelation 12:5), he will use force against God's people (Revelation 12:17).

## Nehemiah Takes Action

***So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. (4:6)***

The opposition increased when they saw that the wall was built to half its height. So it is in our Christian experience. Satan increases his opposition when he sees men and women faithful to God and His cause and revealing His character in their lives.

Nehemiah's response to opposition is a wonderful example to every Christian who has, like Nehemiah, chosen to be faithful to God and His work. (If you are a Christian who has not faced Satan's opposition, you need to ask yourself if your commitment to God is so half-hearted that Satan does not consider you a threat).

The enemies were furious and indignant and at first, mocked the Jews (Nehemiah 4:1-3). Then *'when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion'. Nehemiah 4:7, 8*

When mockery fails, Satan uses the tools of his trade – force and confusion (remember that *'God is not the author of confusion but of peace'* 1 Corinthians 14:33).

What was Nehemiah's response?

1. **He kept on building the walls...** *'the people had a mind to work'* (4:6). He wasted no time answering or defending himself against enemies. Jesus, too never answered His detractors. He 'opened not His mouth' when faced with the accusations of the crowd.
2. **He continued praying to God...** *'we made our prayer unto our God'* (4:9).
3. **He set sentries to guard against enemies...** *'we set a watch against them day and night'* (4:9). 'Watch and pray' Jesus told His disciples, *'that you enter not into temptation'* (Matthew 26:41). Satan is our great Enemy. We have no strength against his power (our flesh is weak) until we have learnt to watch and pray without ceasing.

*'The peace of God shall garrison (shall stand guard as a sentry) over your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus' Philippians 4:7*

*“Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning salvation.” Dallas Willard*

### Removing the Rubbish

*Then Judah said, “The strength of the labourers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.” Nehemiah 4:10*

Here is another problem Nehemiah faced. It was an **internal** problem and it came from within, from the royal tribe of Judah. They were saying that there was too much rubbish, the problem was insurmountable and their strength was weak

Underlying this story is another spiritual principle. There was too much rubbish on the foundation. No proper building can occur until the foundations are cleared. How is it with our personal lives? Are we wise and building on the Rock? Is our message ‘Salvation through Christ alone’ or do we add our own rubbish, our ideas, our philosophies to the foundation? Is the gospel we preach, ‘Not I, but Christ’ or is it ‘Christ and I’? It is only a house or temple built on Christ alone that will gain the eternal riches.

*For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:9, 10*

*“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. Matthew 7:24, 25*

### Discouragement from his own people

*So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, “From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us.” (4:12)*

*The Jews who lived near the enemy came and told us again and again, “They will come from all directions and attack us! (NLT)*

Not only were these Jews not taking part in the work; they repeatedly discouraged the workers. They ‘lived near the enemy’. How is it with us today? Are we enthusiastically allowing God to build His kingdom in us and in the church? Or are we continuously discouraging God’s people, saying the task is too great and the enemy is too strong?

The Bible says these Jews ‘lived near the enemy’. Perhaps they had become friends with the enemy and were more influenced by them than by the words of the prophets and priests and Nehemiah.

In James 4:4 we are told that friendship with the world is enmity with God and whoever is a friend of the world is an enemy of God. We need to examine our hearts and ask God to reveal to us where our true affections lie – is it with the world or with the kingdom of God. If we are worldly, we will not be interested in the work of God and we may even try to discourage those who are building His kingdom here on earth.

‘Satan takes advantage of every unconsecrated element for the accomplishment of his purposes. Among those who profess to be the supporters of God’s cause there are those who unite with His enemies and thus lay His cause open to the attacks of His bitterest foes. Even some who desire the work of God to prosper will yet weaken the hands of His servants by hearing, reporting, and half believing the slanders, boasts, and menaces of His adversaries. Satan works with marvellous success through his agents, and all who yield to their influence are subject to a bewitching power that destroys the wisdom of the wise and the understanding of the prudent. But, like Nehemiah, God’s people are neither to fear nor to despise their enemies. Putting their trust in

God, they are to go steadily forward, doing His work with unselfishness, and committing to His providence the cause for which they stand.

Amidst great discouragement, Nehemiah made God his trust, his sure defence. And He who was the support of His servant then has been the dependence of His people in every age. In every crisis His people may confidently declare, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Romans 8:31. *'Prophets and Kings: p 645*

### Nehemiah's Response to Personal Threats

The enemies of the Jews used many other tactics to oppose Nehemiah. They tried compromise (6:1-4), slander (6:5-9) and spies and treachery (6:10-14). Those involved in treachery included the nobles of Judah who sent letters to Tobiah. They sided with him because he had influential family connections (6:17-19).

All of the above strategies are used by Satan even today to discourage and dissuade God's people.

*Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together among the villages in the plain of Ono." But they thought to do me harm. So I sent messengers to them, saying, "**I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?**" But they sent me this message four times, and I answered them in the same manner. (6:2-4)*

*Sanballat sent me an open letter... 'So come, therefore, and let us consult together. Then I sent to him, saying, "**No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart.**" For they all were trying to make us afraid, saying, "Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will not be done." Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands. Nehemiah 6:5, 7-9*

### **Doing a Great Work**

*And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, "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." And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work. (4:14, 15)*

Our confidence comes from remembering the Lord and His goodness to us in the past.

*Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. **Our God will fight for us.**" (4:19, 20)*

*"**I am doing a great work**"... So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days... and it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God. (6:3, 15, 16)*

**When we are certain that we are in God's will and we are doing the work He has called us to do, we can live in utter confidence.** Fear has no place in the heart of a man or woman of faith, for we know that though the battle may be fierce, the battle is not ours but God's. He is our Leader and Commander and He is the Victorious One; we are only called to follow Him and claim His victory over the Enemy by faith.

**"You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." 1 John 4:4**

"As we watch this strong, earnest, godly hero, Nehemiah, resolutely leading the rebuilding in the first part of the book, then resolutely resisting compromise and laxity and intrigue in the second part of the book, we find the spiritual message of it all coming home to us with great force. Let us heed its voice to us. There is no winning without working and warring. There is no opportunity without opposition. There is no "open door" set before us without there being many "adversaries" to obstruct our entering it (1 Corinthians 16:9). Whenever the saints

say, "Let us arise and build," the enemy says, "Let us arise and oppose." There is no triumph without trouble. There is no victory without vigilance. There is a cross in the way to every crown that is worth wearing. Lessons and analogies are everywhere in this book. There are the walls of a city of God to be built in every individual human heart. There are the walls of a city of God to be built among the nations of the earth. Nehemiah exemplifies the vital principles which are involved in all such building, if it is to be successful building in the true sense. And we must add that Nehemiah himself is a really first-rank character-study. He stands out conspicuously as a man of prayer, a man of faith, a man of courage, a man of action." *JS Baxter*