

**February 25 2024**

**Ezra 4:1-5**

*1* Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, *2* they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here."  
*3* But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."  
*4* Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build *5* and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Scriptures for further study:

Deuteronomy 6:13-14

Luke 4:8

Matthew 10:39

Matthew 19:29

Acts 2:38

Acts 16:31

Mark 1:14-15

2 Thessalonians 2:15

“It is easy to overlook or play down the description of this delegation as ‘the adversaries’ and so to form an impression of the encounter as a rude rebuff to a sincere and friendly gesture. Instead, we are meant to see it as a threat.”

-Derek Kidner



### **The Hand of God to Strengthen Us to Stand Firm Ezra 4:1-5**

**BIG IDEA:** As we seek to build the church in the face of opposition, let us stand firm against the subtle threats of adding to or subtracting from the gospel.

Simply, Christ alone.

#### **OUTLINE**

1. Subtle Threat
2. Subtraction by Addition
3. Standing Firm

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These "Sermon Discussion Questions" are designed for study during the week for believers in a wide variety of ages & stages in their walk with Christ.

1. What offers have you accepted that seemed tremendous but cost more than you could have anticipated?
2. From the sermon, a subtle threat lies in the call to faith and repentance seen in how churches have embraced the cultural perspective on sexual orientation and gender dysphoria. What are other subtle threats to the evangelical church today? How should a biblically faithful church fend off these threats?
3. How can opposition to the gospel help the mission of Christ in the world? Think of passages from the Bible or a moment in church history to support your answer. Refer to Acts 13:45.
4. How do you see our church standing firm in its commitment to advance in faith?
5. What does standing firm look like in your personal life, home, and community? Refer to 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 1 Corinthians 16:13, Matthew 24:42.

"What appears to be an attitude of exclusiveness displayed by God's people in this passage is troublesome to our modern society, where perhaps one of the highest virtues is the willingness to accept and cooperate with persons whose beliefs and practices differ from one's one...these neighbors claimed to worship the same God as the Jews. However, though they acknowledged him by name, they also worshipped other gods... in God's sight such 'syncretism' is not real worship but sin and rebellion and would have proved fatal to the spiritual life of the new community."

- Mervin Breneman

"A growing number of families and individuals becoming faithful disciples of Jesus within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture. This faithful discipleship will express itself by living within as much of their culture, including the religious life of the culture, as is biblically faithful."

-Kevin Higgins

“To be clear, such an approach emphasizes that those who want to follow Jesus can do so without leaving the previous, native ‘socio-religious’ identity and community into which they were born.

-Travis Meyers

“Repentance and faith belong together. They denote two aspects in conversion that are equally essential to it. Thus, either term implies the presence of the other because each reality (repentance or faith) is the sine qua non of the other. In grammatical terms, then, the words repent and believe both function as a synecdoche—a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole. Thus, repentance implies faith and faith implies repentance. One cannot exist without the other.”

- Sinclair Ferguson

***Praise to Jesus.*** Praise God for subjecting everything to Jesus; He left nothing outside His control. Though, you do not yet see everything in subjection to Him. Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for you.” He stood firm for you so you, too, can stand firm.

***Repentance through Jesus.*** Have you lost sight of the Gospel’s call to repentance by believing you don’t need to walk away from sin? Repent and by faith, receive forgiveness, and walk away from sin.

***Consecration for Jesus.*** As you seek to do your part to build the church in the face of opposition, stand firm against the subtle threats of adding to or subtracting from the Gospel. Look to Jesus, “the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, to equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.” (Hebrews 13:20-21)

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Assyria in 721 B.C., Esarhaddon, the king of Assyria, sent some of his people to colonize the depopulated areas. These Assyrians intermarried with the Jews who were left in Israel, creating a mixed population. And because Samaria was the administrative capital of the new colony, they became known as Samaritans. The result was that this mixture of Jews with Assyrians led to a mix of true and false religion. ‘They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods’ (2 Kings 17:33). This is why the Jews in Jerusalem refused to cooperate with the Samaritans. To allow them to share in the building of God’s house would have jeopardized God’s blessing upon the work.

- Williams, P. (2006). Opening up Ezra (pp. 52–53).

## FOR FAMILIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

1 Remind your children about the repeated phrase in Ezra that God stirred the hearts of Cyrus (1:1) and the Israelites that returned to their Promised Land (1:5). Talk about how this book shows the hands of God directing this return and renewal of God's people.

2. Why would Zerubbabel refuse the offer of help from "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin"? (He refused because they were not friendly nations but were the "adversaries" or enemies of the Israelites. God's people show their faith in God by not looking to other nations to help them but looking to God. Remind your children that these other nations are not believers in God, and throughout the Israelite history, the neighbor nations have sought to destroy Israel. Throughout the Israelite history, the neighbor nations have sought to destroy Israel. Point out in verses 4-5 we see the true intentions of these nations since they "discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build".)

3. If you have older children, then ask them why would God allow His people to face this opposition? What can we learn from this? (God allowed this opposition and other opposition in the past to test their faith in Him and to keep them dependent on Him. If the Israelites allow unbelievers to build their place of true worship of God, then the Israelites would be allowing their worship to be corrupted. We can learn from this about the importance of the true worship of God and how we will face opposition. We are called to trust God and to be faithful through the power of the Holy Spirit.)

4. Read the Scriptures for Further Study together and talk about God's promises to us and how they are meant to encourage and strengthen us.

Scriptures for further study:

John 16:33

Romans 8:31-32

Matthew 28:20

Josuha 1:9

Hebrews 13:5

## FOR STUDENTS

1. It is good to be aware of the methods commonly employed by adversaries to halt God's people and God's work. What various methods of adversaries can you observe in this chapter? Which have you observed or experienced personally?
2. Can you draw parallels between the adversaries' tactics in Ezra 4 and the challenges you face in your personal or professional life?
3. How does this passage shed light on the role of prayer and faith in overcoming adversity?
4. How does the story in Ezra 4 encourage believers to remain steadfast despite opposition?
5. Jump forward to the time of Jesus and read his words to his disciples in John 15:18-20. Read the apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 6:10-13. What do these words tell us about facing opposition as Christians today?

\*Selected questions borrowed and adapted from Ezra Bible Study by Kathleen Neilson

## FOR SEEKERS AND NEW BELIEVERS

1. When you become a believer, you can just expect opposition. This has been the case for God's people in OT times, NT times, and throughout much of church history. Opposition (or persecution) may occur at different levels of severity, and it may also take many different forms, from persecution at the hands of the government to opposition from people in your work, school, or neighborhood who do not like Christians and what we stand for.

Question: Why is it important to have the right expectations before and during our journey as Christians? What kind of opposition are you facing at the moment? In what ways do you need to pray for more courage in the face of it?

2. Here the people of Israel were offered some crafty invitations to compromise their faith, and yet they remained resolute and faithful.

Question: What subtle, or perhaps overt, ways have you been tempted to compromise your holiness or purity, or devotion to the Lord? How can you enlist the help of other Christians to support you and provide you some encouragement?

3. The Israelites determined that it was better to appease/trust God than to appease their neighbors.

Question: Why is it impossible to do both? (See Galatians 1:10)

4. The enemies of Israel pretended that they wanted to worship God, but they actually had the ulterior motive of wanting to gain control and influence for themselves.

Question: In what ways is it possible, even for us as Christians, to say that it's all about God when it's really about us? Do we get involved in church only if we get the recognition? Are we teaching in order to help people grow in their faith, or is it more about us showcasing our intelligence? Is it possible to want a leadership (or other prominent) role in the church, but mainly just because we like the control, the title, or the influence?

5. We know from history that these enemies of Israel probably did actually worship God, just as they claimed. The problem was that they also worshipped other gods at the same time. We call this syncretism.

Question: Are there any ways in which we too have syncretized our Christian faith with other "gods" or "isms"? What else may be competing for your allegiance? Is God really your one and only God?

# The Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People



*The Ancient of Days, William Blake, 1794.*

About the artwork:

The Ancient of Days, found in prophecies of Daniel, is the subject of William Blake's engraving in which he shows us the Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People, the sermon series title for Ezra.

The Ancient of Days is the cover art for Blake's Poem *Europe: a Prophecy* (1794). The Ancient of Days is a name for God the Father, whom the prophet Daniel spoke of in Daniel 7, where he saw Jesus, the Son of Man, "given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." This artistic rendering by Blake serves to encourage God's people to know that He is still active and on the move with His plan of redemption despite their surroundings and circumstances.

William Blake (1757-1827) was committed to bringing prophecies and visions of the God of the Bible to life; the poet, printmaker, and painter was unrecognized and died impoverished. Despite their circumstances, William and his devoted wife Catherine, whom he taught to read and write, enjoyed a happy marriage and life together.

As a child, he came home one day and told his parents he saw "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." His middle-class mom and dad greatly loved him and all their seven children but didn't appreciate their son's story. Only the pleas of his mom saved him from the "beating" his dad said he deserved! Blake's visions continued throughout his fifty years. Among his many visions, Blake saw Christ with his Apostles and a great procession of monks and priests and heard their chant." He saw "God's face pressed against his window, seeing angels among the haystacks, and being visited by the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel." Blake believed the Bible was the most significant work of poetry ever written. It was the basis for the art. His love for the Bible and his visions were the stuff of a vast collection of visual and literary art through which Blake attempted to describe "the body of God.

Barker, (2004) (Barker, William Blake 1757-1827, 2004)

Today, William Blake is considered one of the greatest poets in the English language and one of the most original visual artists of his day.