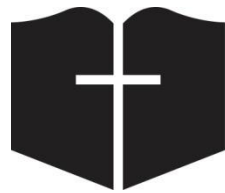


*From the Pulpit of*



**EVANSTON**  
Bible Fellowship

**Opposition**

**No. 4**

**Ezra 4:1-24**

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**Series: Ezra**

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Last year I read a book about Elon Musk, who is the man behind endeavors such as SpaceX, which is a company that sends rockets into space and hopes to one day start a colony on Mars. He is also the major initiator of the car company Tesla, which has electric cars all over the place, and SolarCity which creates and manages solar energy for residential/commercial properties. The book tells of the countless hours he spent on each and the numerous opposition. He faced government regulators, investors, delays in project completion, material failures, employee uprisings, personal setbacks and his own personal issues. The book is basically about Elon Musk and all the challenges he overcame to follow his dreams.

Many of you are set to graduate and follow your dreams. You may never fly a rocket or create an electric car, but you will still face setbacks and encounter opposition. Most of the opposition is to be expected in the form of career struggles, family challenges and personal setbacks. But I want you to be aware of another challenge that may not be on your radar. It's a challenge faced by believers throughout history and one of which you must be aware. The god of this age, Satan and his demons, are out to mess with you, lie to you, accuse you and ultimately destroy you. As you seek to follow the Lord, you will face daily opposition. This is what I want to bring to your attention: Those attempting great things for God (or simply trying to follow Him) will encounter consistent Satanic opposition. This has been true throughout Biblical history and is true today. Let's look at this opposition in Ezra.

Let's once again get our Biblical and historical bearings as we place the book of Ezra in an appropriate timeline: God created the world, Noah, Abraham, Israel goes to Egypt, Exodus out of Egypt, David, kingdom splits (Northern and Judah). Northern Kingdom destroyed, Judah exiled to Babylon due to sin, Exodus out of Babylon back to Jerusalem to rebuild, 400 years of Biblical silence, Jesus Christ. The first six chapters in Ezra are about the original exiles (first wave) who returned to rebuild the Temple that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. This effort was led by Zerubbabel. Once we hit chapter 7, about 80 years have passed since the exiles returned, then Ezra comes on the scene to establish the people in the ways of the Lord and His law. Ezra is part of the latter returning exiles (second wave) to Jerusalem. Ezra was focused on Renewal, to see the people of God spiritually renewed in their commitment to the Lord. It's a

story of starting over.<sup>1</sup> Main Theme: God doesn't scrap His wayward people but restores and renews them so they can worship Him.

Let's recap where we are so far in Ezra. Chapter 1: King Cyrus proclaims a return of the exiles to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Chapter 2: List of Returnees Chapter 3: The beginning of Work and Worship Chapter 4: Opposition

Although the Israelites started laying the foundation of the Temple in chapter 3, the work will not be completed until 16 years later due to opposition. Let's start with Ezra 4:1-2: "Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, 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.'" Take note that these people are 'adversaries' who claim to worship the same God and in fact have been 'sacrificing to him' for a long time. These adversaries are likely transplants who were sent to occupy the land after the Assyrians deported the Northern Kingdom Jews (2 Kings 17:24). They brought their religion and combined it with the religion of Israel through sacrifice so they had a mixture. They may sacrifice to God, but it's just mixed in with worshipping their gods as well. They approach Zerubbabel to get in on the rebuild, but Zerubbabel sniffs out syncretism.

Verse 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.'" Zerubbabel says more than, "Thanks, but no thanks." He gets right to the heart of the matter: "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God..." The people of the land act as if they worship the same God and Zerubbabel is very clear that they do not. They have a mix and match religion that tacks on God, but the Israelites worship the one and only true God. Zerubbabel is protecting the nations from falling into the sins of the past of idolatry and the mixture of religions that got them deported to Babylon in the first place.

This attempt to blend religions has been going on throughout time and even exists today as many people claim that all religions are the same. But Jesus is very clear when He says in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." And people can't know the true God unless they know Jesus. Opponents once asked Him in John 8:19, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my father also." Sometimes our struggles and challenges would ease up a bit if we would just compromise and not narrow so much on Jesus. People are cool with some of the teachings of Jesus and think he is a nice philosopher, but the exclusive claims as the only way to heaven seem a bit extreme for our day and age. We can't compromise, however, because if we do, we will fall into idolatry and syncretism.

Verses 4-5: "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build 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." Since the Jews did not want to join in the 'Ecumenical Kumbaya' their enemies 'discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build.' They even bribed some officials to 'frustrate their purpose' so that the Jews stopped working on the Temple all during the reign of Cyrus and even into the reign of Darius.

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<sup>1</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, page 802.

The work stoppage lasted about 16 years. This is Satanic pushback and flat out attacks of the enemy to prevent the worship of the Lord and the advancement of His Kingdom.

Now when we come to verse 6, I want you to imagine a parenthesis and then you could put another parenthesis at the end of verse 23. The author has been writing about the opposition faced by the initial exiles as they attempted to rebuild the Temple. Now he inserts opposition from a later time when the Jews were trying to rebuild the walls. The history he gives and the names included come from a time in the future in which the Jews faced opposition as they tried to rebuild the walls. The reason why he inserts that here is to show that those attempting great things for God will encounter Satanic pushback. Opposition is nothing new; it happened during the time of the Temple rebuild and it happened many years later as Jews attempted to rebuild the walls. It even happens in our time as it says in 2 Timothy 3:12: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..." Don't be surprised by the Satanic pushback you feel when you attempt to walk with God, but also don't be surprised by the breakthroughs that God gives to those who step out by faith. God will ultimately be victorious no matter the roadblocks and He is faithful to multiple generations, all the way to today. God has been faithful before and God will be faithful again.

This digression is meant for encouragement. Verse 6: "And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem." This is just one verse that points to the opposition at a latter time when Ahasuerus was King (named 'Xerxes,' King during the time of Esther). It's like Ezra says, those rebuilding the Temple foundation faced opposition, just like that time the Jews faced opposition during the reign of Xerxes when an accusatory letter was sent. Does the word 'accusation' stir up any other thoughts in you? Satan is referred to as the accuser in Revelation 12:10: "And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.'"

The author recounts some more opposition at a later time beginning in verses 7-8: "In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows..." At this later time, Artaxerxes is the king and once again another accusatory letter is written against the Jews for attempting to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. This wall rebuild will probably happen before the arrival of Nehemiah who served under Artaxerxes.

Here is the header of the letter from the opponents in verses 9-10: "Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River." The opponents, in the header, claim their right to the land based upon previous leadership decrees.

Now to the letter starting in verses 11-12: "(This is a copy of the letter that they sent.) 'To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.'" The first strategy of the opponents is to be dramatic and create an alarm. "The Jews are working on the walls and rebuilding the 'rebellious and wicked city.'" They pile on the dramatic 'red alert' in verses 13-14: "Now be it known to the king that if this

city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king," Not only will the Jews be rebellious, their opponents contend, but they won't pay their taxes. The opponents are such hypocritical fakers as they brag about their dependence on the King and do not want the King dishonored. They act like they love paying taxes and being dependent upon the king. Finish it off with verses 14b-16: "...therefore we send and inform the king, in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste. We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River." They are encouraging the King to do a background check and if he does, then he will discover that this 'rebellious city' has a history of sedition that will be stirred up again. And if that happens, the king will lose his authority 'in the province Beyond the River.' This is way over the top; as if some dinky city could bring down the King's Empire.

The letter had its intended effect as we see the King's response in verses 17-23: "The king sent an answer: 'To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me. And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king? Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.'" The king freaks out, does a background check on the history of Jerusalem and finds that 'this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it.' The king halts the work immediately. About 50,000<sup>2</sup> workers come to a standstill and the enemies seem to have succeeded in thwarting the mission of God. The work stayed like this until Nehemiah came to the land under the authority of Artaxerxes and restarted the work about two years later.

The parenthesis is over from the latter oppositions of rebuilding the wall and Ezra returns to the rebuilding of the Temple in verse 24, which picks up where it left off in verse 5, "Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia." This work stoppage on the Temple lasted for about 16-20 years. That is brutal. I have such a hard time waiting, especially waiting under opposition (Anyone else?). Especially waiting when permission had been granted, but now has been thwarted through nonsensical opposition. This is worse than our foster system.

Conclusion: Those attempting great things for God (or simply trying to follow Him) will encounter consistent Satanic opposition. But let me add to this statement the other point of the passage: Those attempting great things for God (or simply trying to follow Him) will encounter consistent Satanic opposition but God will be faithful. The Temple work eventually started again, the walls were even rebuilt and many years later the Messiah would come to that city and

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<sup>2</sup> *The MacArthur Study Bible*, page 635.

enter that Temple. This Messiah, Jesus Christ, would live a perfect life and on the cross crush Satanic opposition and die to reconcile sinners by faith to God. Even those of us who believe, until we are with Jesus, will continue to face opposition. But God will be faithful to give us deliverance, especially when we are home with Him.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Evanston Bible Fellowship, Evanston, Illinois, by Pastor Jason Lancaster on Sunday, June 5, 2016. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. Evanston Bible Fellowship is a community of sojourners empowering one another to cultivate Gospel transformation.