

Rising From the Ruins

Opposition

Ezra Chapters 4-6

Leaders Guide

Think of a time when you faced serious opposition to a project that was important to you. Who opposed you? Who supported you? Did you pray about it? Did you search for God's advice? Share with your group.

The Enemies

Once the foundation of the temple was complete, you would think that the construction would commence quickly and smoothly. But, that was not the case. The enemies (Samaritans) offered to help, but were turned down, so they got angry and plotted sabotage.

Read Ezra 4:1-5, 24 and 5:3-5.

Note for leader: For more details on who the Samaritans were, what they believed, and their relationship to the Israelites, refer to a good Bible Dictionary.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- What was the reason that the Samaritans gave for being included?
- Why did the leaders turn them down?
- What strategies did the Samaritans use to sabotage the construction?

For levels B and C

In verse 4, the Hebrew words used for “make them afraid” and “discourage” are *balahh* and *raphah*. *Balahh* means to terrify or cause palpitations. *Raphah* means to weaken or cause to fail. The fact that the words also rhyme probably gives extra emphasis to the threat. And note that this threatening behavior lasted through the reign of Cyrus and into the first two years of Darius’ reign—approximately 10 years. That’s a long time to be terrorized by your enemies!

Answer the following questions:

Level B

- Why was including the Samaritans in the project “too great a cost?”
- What kind of counselors do you think they hired? What strategies might they have used?
- How might opponents of a building project today use some of the same tactics?

Level C

- How scary is the word *balahh*? Terrify or cause palpitations! Why do you think they would go to such lengths to sabotage the building of the temple? (*Hint: Where was the Samaritan’s temple?*)
- This wasn’t just an attack on a building project, it was also a spiritual attack. How does the enemy use real world situations to attack your faith?
- “Fringe church people might appear well-intentioned initially but can become fierce opponents of a Biblically obedient ministry.” W.P.Benn. What do you think Benn means by “fringe” church people? Have you ever experienced a situation where one group in the church became opponents of a ministry of the church? Share your experience. How do you determine Biblical obedience?

The Prophets

When we are called to follow God, we are not given passage on a luxury cruise boat. Instead we walk up a creaky gangplank into a leaky warship. And over the PA system we hear the words, “All hands on deck!” Those words come from God’s cheerleaders, the prophets. God didn’t call His people and expect them to persevere alone. He sent special messengers to encourage them and make sure they did not forget their purpose.

Read Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14; Haggai 1:1-15; 2:3-5; Zechariah 1:1, 16-17; 2:4-5, 10-13.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- Who were the prophets God sent?
- What encouraging words did they have for the people? What advice?
- What did the prophets say the Israelites were doing wrong?

Level B

- What was going wrong that required intervention by the prophets?
- What did Haggai and Zechariah proclaim about Jerusalem's future?
- How did the people and the leaders react to the words of the prophets?

Level C

- Who are modern day prophets that inspire you to get on with God's work? What do they do or say that gets your attention?
- Compare Haggai 2:3-5 and Hebrews 12:1-3. How are these messages similar?
- How can you as an individual (especially if your GPS said prophet) and as a church family be encouraging to your community when they tire and lose their energy and purpose?

The Verdict

The opposition sent a letter to King Darius insinuating that the Israelites were not authorized to build. They asked Darius to search the records for this "so-called" decree from King Cyrus. Darius honored their request, found the decree, and wrote them a letter in return with his verdict.

Read Ezra 5: 6-17 and 6:1-12.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- What were the claims of Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates?
- What was Darius' conclusion?
- As a result, how did Darius help with the completion of the temple?

Level B

- Do you think the opposition believed there was a decree from Cyrus? If so, why would they still write the letter?
- Darius could have ignored the letter, made his own decision without research, or looked for the truth. What does his choice say about the type of king he was?
- Darius' decree might be described as punitive. Do you think this was part of God's provision for the Israelites or an aggravated king making a point? Why or why not?

Level C

- When there is a question about the truth behind an action, how do you respond? Like the governor's associates? Like Darius? In another way? Explain.
- How would you describe Darius' character as a leader? Which of his qualities would you want to see in the leaders around you, your community, your church?

- What was your reaction to the warning at the end of Darius' letter? Was it necessary? Over the top? A smart move? Godly intervention? Explain.

Celebration

The temple was completed in March of 516 BC, the sixth year of Darius' reign and almost 4 years after the letter. The people now had a reason to celebrate and a place to do so. JOY! JOY! JOY! First they dedicated the temple. A month later they celebrated Passover in the temple for the first time in over 80 years.

Read Ezra 6:15-22.

Note for leaders: In Aramaic the word for dedication is hanukkah. The holiday we know as Hanukkah celebrates a later capture and rededication of the temple in 165 BC. This happened between the Old and New Testaments, 351 years after the rebuilding of the temple.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- What was included in the celebration of the dedication of the temple? How were the people feeling?
- Why was celebrating Passover in the temple so important to the Israelites?
- What were the Israelites giving thanks to God for?

Level B

- What is significant about the installation of priests and Levites at this time? (1 Chronicles 24:13, Luke 1:8-9)
- Joy is mentioned in verses 16 and 22. What was the source and reason for their joy? How do you celebrate joy?
- Passover is a celebration of God's rescue of His people from bondage in Egypt. Why is this holiday such an appropriate way for these Israelites to rejoice?

Level C

- How do you celebrate after finishing an important project? Is God always part of your celebration?
- When you dedicate a building or a person to God's service, what is your attitude? How do you express it? Compare yourself to the Israelites at the temple dedication. How are you the same? Different?
- Notice the importance of purification in the celebration of Passover. Do you ever feel that separation and purification are needed at times in your life? If so, when? Would it enhance the experience? What is the advantage or disadvantage of inclusion?