**True Worship Opposed**

**Ezra 4 (ESV)**

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Dr. Ritch Boerckel

We’re going to be in Ezra 4 today. It’s a fantastic chapter! We’re in this series in Ezra. He is this prophet who teaches us about the people of God, Israel, returning to the land after a Babylonian captivity. They had spent seventy years in captivity. God says now go back to the land. You haven’t lived there for seventy years. First build an altar and then build the foundation of the temple, then ultimately build the temple. Then Nehemiah will come along and he will say to build the walls of the city. It’s sort of the reigniting of God’s people around the throne of God in worship. Without a temple, they can’t make sacrifices. Without a temple, the localized presence of God is not present in their midst. So it’s vital that they build this temple in their worship. So this really is about spiritual revival.

We’re asking you as you walk with us through this great book to pray, “Lord, bring personal revival to my heart. Then Lord, use me then as you bring revival to my heart, to ignite others so that our church together experiences revival of God’s Spirit.” What a wonder it will be as God would answer our prayer toward that end. So in Ezra 4, we’re going to be reading through verse 16 today. We’re going to talk about the opposition we can expect to face when we pursue spiritual revival, when we pursue the worship of the living God.

***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.* ***6*** *And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.*

***7*** *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.* ***8*** *Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:* ***9*** *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,* ***10*** *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.* ***11*** *(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* ***12*** *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.* ***13*** *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.* ***14*** *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,* ***15*** *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.* ***16*** *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.”*

Skip down with me now to his response in verse 23.

***23*** *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.* ***24*** *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.*

May God encourage us through His Word, today!

When Kimberly and I moved from Texas to Illinois in 1993, the state of Illinois, believe it or not, allowed a person to request personal license plates free of any charge. So I thought this was great! I can put a verse on the back of my car that will encourage me and perhaps others who see it. It didn’t take me long to decide what verse I wanted. It was Ezra 7:10, which reads

**Ezra 7:10** For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

In this verse, Ezra sets the pattern for every true minister of the Gospel. Indeed, this is really for every Christian, but it’s for every true minister of Jesus Christ. We are to be people who study God’s Word and then we’re to be people who obey God’s Word and then we are to be people who teach God’s Word. It’s always in that order. I wanted to be reminded every time that I looked at the back of my car, of God’s call upon my life. So Ezra 710 is what I requested.

However, when the plates arrived, as is consistent with the state of Illinois, it was not Ezra 710. It was Ezra 4 that I received. I have to be frank with you. I didn’t remember what Ezra 4 said. So I quickly opened up my Bible and asked “What is the message that I’m going to be telling myself and everybody else who sees the back of my car?” Oh no! What message is this? I knew people were going to ask about it.

Sure enough, people would come up to me and ask me, “Pastor, why do you have Ezra 4? I looked at it and I read it and I don’t know why you chose Ezra 4 to be on your license plate.” I would reply calmly, “It’s because God doesn’t want us to accept help from the Samaritans.” (Laughter!) Then I said really, it’s a chapter about not compromising your faith and that actually the real story is that I didn’t request Ezra 4. I requested Ezra 7:10.

But here is Ezra 4 and it’s a beautiful chapter because God doesn’t want us to compromise in relationship to our worship. It’s a wonderful, wonderful chapter. So we open up our Bibles here and God teaches us that we should expect to face opposition every time we lean into God for worship, every time we lean into God individually or as a church family for spiritual revival.

Here is the truth. Satan stands ready to oppose anyone who seeks after God. Satan stands ready and active to oppose anyone who labors to bring God glory. It ought not to surprise us that the moment we finally start deciding “I’m going to humble myself. I’m going to start committing my life to Jesus Christ wholly and using my time and my labors and my resources to invest in God’s kingdom. I want to be all about God.” It ought not to surprise us that that’s the very moment when we experience the greatest opposition of our life. We experience the greatest hardship, the greatest suffering, the greatest difficulty.The story of the Bible tells us that this is so.

While we read about the Samaritans here that are living in Jerusalem and about three guys named Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel, we know that much more is happening than the human players on the field of this story. There is someone behind these people who is also active in opposing God, opposing anyone who would seek to bring God glory. The real battle is not against these guys who have long since passed away. The real battle is in the spiritual realm. How do we know that? It’s because the Bible tells us so. The Bible tells us that we have a real adversary named Satan who from the beginning has sought to knock us off of our relationship with God, away from worship. It is this invisible realm that we cannot see that is constantly opposing God, constantly opposing His worship.

In Genesis 3, Satan is present tempting Adam and Eve away from worship and he succeeds. In Matthew 4, the New Testament, the beginning of the gospels, Satan is present to tempt Jesus away from the honor and glory of His Father. Here, Satan fails. He fails miserably! In John 13, Satan enters Judas to complete the betrayal that brings Jesus to the cross. He succeeds in Judas’ life, but he fails big time because that big plan was really about his ultimate demise. The cross becomes the means by which God would crush Satan’s head.

The apostle Paul understands that Satan is active in the many times and many places that he is opposed as he is bringing the gospel to the world.Whether it’s in his stoning at Lystra or his beating and imprisonment in Philippi or in a shipwreck at sea or in the betrayal by false brothers in many of the churches, Paul knows that the opposition he is facing is not from the people who are active also in part of this plan of opposition, but it’s really satanic in its origin. Paul writes this in Ephesians 6.

**Ephesians 6:10** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

It’s the only way we can face this opponent. He is too strong for any of us.

**Ephesians 6:11** Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

What are his schemes? We’re going to talk about his schemes today. They are many and varied. Then Paul says

**Ephesians 6:12** For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,

The moment we start focusing on people who are instruments in the hands of Satan in opposing God, the moment we start focusing on them, we’ve missed the big picture. We don’t wrestle against flesh and blood.

**Ephesians 6:12** …but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

The main idea as we trace our way through Ezra 4 is that when God’s people pursue worship, strong opposition will war against us. We must expect it. We must be ready for it. Today, we consider five specific tools in Satan’s workshop that he uses to keep us from revival, to keep us from worship. Then we’re going to look at five corresponding resources that God provides His people so that we can be successful in pressing in toward worship and toward spiritual revival. The first tool that we see in Ezra 4 that Satan loves to use is the tool of

**Satan’s Tool #1: Compromise**

Remember that Ezra 3 ends with a big celebration of worship. People are singing and shouting and dancing. They are just proclaiming the goodness of the Lord. The altar has been built. Sacrifices can be made. The foundation of the temple is now laid. Things are just getting ready. The people who have returned to the land are experiencing God’s blessing. So far, everything seems to be going really smoothly through the first three chapters. We have just one little sort of foreshadowing in Ezra 3:3 when it says

**Ezra 3:3** …fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands,

It’s just sort of a passing comment. Everything is successful. They’re pursuing worship, but there is fear there because of the peoples of the lands. We’re not told what the peoples of the lands were doing to make them fearful, but we discover that there is a crack in their peace, in their joy. In Ezra 4, that crack widens to a huge canyon.

***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,*

In other words, they’re saying, “Let us invest some of our time and our talents and our energy and we’ll even give money to support this work. We’re with you. Let us build with you.”

*for we worship your God as you do,*

We worship the same God.

*and we have been sacrificing to him*

You’re making sacrifices. We’ve been doing the same thing.

*ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.”*

Now remember, we’re in the Persian Empire now at the time of Ezra 4. Before that was the Babylonians. Before that was the Assyrians. They’re saying, “For a long time, since 700 BC, we’ve been making sacrifices to the Lord. They never stopped.” For the Jews, sacrifices stopped. Why? It would have been wrong for them to make sacrifices to God while they were still in Babylon. There was one place they were to make sacrifices. That’s right here in Jerusalem and the temple has been torn. But they said, “We’ve been doing this all along, so we’re with you.”

At first the reader may consider that this is really great news. This is a small group of people. There are only 50,000 of them. They have a huge project. They don’t have that many resources in terms of people or in terms of money. Here are these nice people who are already living in the land. They just want to be good neighbors. Now, Ezra tips his hand at the beginning by calling them adversaries. We’re not even told why they’re adversaries, yet. He just says these guys are adversaries. They are enemies. They seem to be nice. They claim to worship the same God. But notice the line here in verse 2.

*and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.”*

Esarhaddon ruled from around 681-669 BC. Again, the people offering help are the people from this Northern Kingdom who were defeated by the Assyrians. The Assyrians had a different kind of strategy for ruling. Their strategy was rather than deporting people from the land, they would send more people into the land to intermarry. That’s what happened. They sent a whole bunch of Assyrians into the land to intermarry. When they intermarried and the Assyrians got there, they realized “We need to still worship the God of this locality. That’s important! But we’re bringing our gods, too.” So they continued to worship the LORD. This report was true in that regard. They said, “We have an altar to the LORD, to Yahweh.” But they also worshiped other gods as well. They worshiped the LORD in these high places, in these places where they decided to make sacrifice. These folks are the Samaritans of the New Testament. We find a description of the Samaritans in 2 Kings 17.

**2 Kings 17:32** They also feared the LORD and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places,

So they had a priesthood and they had high places. Jerusalem was a high place, a holy place.

**2 Kings 17:32-33** …who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. So they feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away.

What is Zerubbabel’s response to the Samaritans, this people who have some worship of God? They have their own priesthood. They have their own holy places, but they also have these other gods as well. They’re syncretistic. In other words, they’re kind of mixing the religions together in one happy soup. What is Zerubbabel’s response?

***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,*

Now, why would Zerubbabel not accept this really generous, seemingly very nice neighborly offer? It seems so narrow to shoo these folks away when they are coming over bringing a plate of cookies. It seems rude, even.Some might think, “Even if there are some theological differences between the Samaritans and the Jews, why not let them help?” This response just doesn’t feel right to many in our modern day. It feels harsh and almost mean-spirited.

These godly leaders, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, the high priests, and the leaders over each of the tribes of Israel understood that cooperation with the Samaritans in building the Temple would lead to compromise in worship.They understood that the reason for the captivity of the Jews by the Babylonians, the captivity they just came out of, was because of syncretism. They became a people who worshiped the LORD, but also worshiped other gods. They knew how much God cares about worship. God is zealous for His Name. It’s no trifling matter to the Lord. They knew that from the very beginning of their history. Remember, God gave ten rules to a guy named Moses. The first four of them have to do with worship. The first two have to do with the very things that the Samaritans are doing. In Exodus 20, these are the first two rules, the first two commandments that God gave.

**Exodus 20:3-4** You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath,

That’s how these other gods were worshiped.

**Exodus 20:4-5** …or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God,

That’s what God says!

**Exodus 20:5** …visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,

God will judge this great evil of false worship. Satan’s first assault on our souls is the compromise of our worship to the LORD. The dominoes of sin fall when our worship gets off track. Those eight other rules, once the first one falls, all of life becomes broken.

Satan came after Jesus during His forty day temptation in the wilderness, in this very sphere. Do you remember that? In Matthew 4, the devil takes Jesus, the Son of God, who is God of very God, yet fully man,

**Matthew 4:8-10** Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”

Satan wasn’t telling him, “Leave this issue of honoring your Father and don’t ever honor Him ever again.” Satan didn’t care so much about that. He just said, “Add to the honor of your Father the honor of me.” He failed! Thank God he failed, because Jesus is God of very God. He stood against him and prevailed in the midst of the harshest temptation. If Satan comes after Jesus, the Son of God, in this area of worship, will he not come after you and me? Is not this the place where he will begin? Satan doesn’t care so much that we worship God. He just cares that we don’t worship God alone or worship Him the way He prescribes. We add to it things that are pleasant to our own flesh. Satan comes after us.

I was thinking about compromise. What forms of compromise? There are many, but there are two that are really and that are really hard to stand against in our day. The first modern compromise is to be open to other paths besides Jesus. It’s the exclusive claims of Christ that Satan wishes to soften among God’s people. Satan whispers, “Don’t be so narrow as to think or say that Jesus is the only way to God. Surely, sincere people who follow other paths will be admitted to heaven.” Friends, Jesus is the only person who could have born our sin in His body. He’s the only person who could have done that because He is the only sinless being and He is the only divine being. He is the only person who did bear our sin upon His Person on the cross. So the cross of Jesus becomes our door through which we enter. We must enter through this door to enter into God’s presence. Apart from this door, we enter into God’s presence with sin still stuck all over us. So yes, there is only one door. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.” This is the one door! Every other door leaves our sin stuck to our soul. Now we’re standing before a holy God who will judge us in righteousness and truth. It’s only this door that when we walk through it, we find ourselves cleansed so that we are given and granted the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ.

The second compromise is to be open to many expressions of sexual practices and identity. This compromise is really, really strong among God’s people. Satan whispers, “Don’t see these expressions of sexual practice or identity as damaging to the soul, but rather, affirm them. Affirm the goodness of them.” Those expressions affirmed by our culture include a wide range of sexual practices and identity. There is fornication, which is sexual behavior outside of the bonds of marriage. There is adultery, which is sexual behavior inside the bonds of marriage, but with those who you don’t have those bonds. There is pornography, which is sexual behavior of the mind and of the heart. There is homosexuality, unbiblical divorce, abortion, transgenderism. This is just to name a few. Each one of these, if you stand up and you give a tweet against any of those things to say this is not in line, be ready. It’s just easier to think I have to be quiet. In being quiet, we start bending away from the worship of God to compromise.

Some ask, doesn’t God love those who sin in these ways? Doesn’t God welcome everyone? The answer is yes. Thank God that He loves people who sin because there is not a person alive that doesn’t sin so grievously that we’re deserving of hell. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Thank God for that! But God doesn’t welcome our sin. He welcomes us as we would humble ourselves before Him and as we would turn from our sin and turn to Him in faith, asking Him to forgive us of our sin and to separate us from sin so that our lives are not joined and under the power of sin anymore. By God’s grace, we can receive the righteousness of God and experience the righteousness of God. Inclusion in the assemblies of God’s people requires that we enter into God’s presence on our knees, crying out, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Friends, do you see any way that Satan is pressuring you to compromise in worship? Is there any pressure you’re feeling? How are you responding? What are we to do when we feel it?

**God’s Resource #1: Rejecting partnerships**

Reject partnerships that cause us to compromise. Here, there is a rejection. There is a separation that says my connection here is actually affecting my worship and I’m beginning to compromise. So I’m looking for ways not to separate myself from living among people of the world, but living in a way where there is the kind of alignment where my worship is compromised. We do live in this world. We do connect with people who oppose God in many ways. I’m not suggesting that we don’t ever do business or have relationships with the Samaritans of the world. I’m suggesting that we simply refuse the Samaritan’s offer to help us build the temple. That’s what I’m suggesting. It’s that we focus on what it means to be a people of God and what it means to worship God. We don’t allow the pressure of those who are outside of the Gospel to enter in and to begin to squeeze us and begin to conform us in ways that dishonor the Lord. Again, what Zerubbabel said to the Samaritans didn’t sound very nice. Sometimes, being nice will keep us from doing what is necessary. So the command to be nice is not in Scripture. Of course, we’re loving. Of course, we’re peace-loving people. We’re peaceful people. But wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable.

Someone says, “I don’t know if I can keep from compromise. It’s so hard to stand alone. I feel like I’m all alone in certain spheres. Inside the church, I don’t feel alone, but outside, I’m just surrounded by people.” I want to encourage you. Do you know that you have a Savior, Jesus, who actually intercedes for you on this very point? Jesus asks the Father to give you strength to stand firm in the face of the temptation to compromise. Why do I say that? It’s because He told us about that in John 17. He said

**John 17:14-18** I have given them your word,

He’s talking about the disciples. These are not just the disciples who are in the room, but also the other disciples. He makes mention of other disciples in the future, us.

**John 17:14-15** …and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world,

In other words, He doesn’t want us to live isolated from the people of the world.

**John 17:15-18** …but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

Isn’t that wonderful that Jesus prays for us? He ever lives as our High Priest to intercede for us.

**Satan’s Tool #2: Discouragement**

Zerubbabel turns down the Samaritans offer of help. We discover the nature of their hearts. When Zerubbabel said, “No, we’re not going to let you help,” then we see the real nature of the Samaritans, here.

***4*** *Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah*

Discouragement is one of the most used tools in Satan’s toolbox. Discouragement saps us of spiritual energy. It tempts us to take a break from the battle. It tempts us to back away from the community of the saints. It tempts us to find a place of respite that is isolated unto ourselves. Sometimes discouragement comes from people outside the people of God, like the Samaritans here. Sometimes discouragement comes from people inside the church.

We are not told how the Samaritans discouraged the Jews in their pursuit of true worship. We’re just told they did. What are some ways that Satan uses to discourage you? Think of them with me. If there is gossip and slander about you or people you love, if there is a betrayal by friends, a brokenness of relationship where we’re like, “How did this relationship get broken?” There is sickness or physical pain. There are real world trials. When your motives get impugned and your words get twisted. When there are frustrations in the work of service to the Lord. All you’re simply doing is serving the Lord and it just seems like frustrations are building and building and building. When hardships come to your life because you’re worshiping, because you’re committed to Christ, that is discouraging. When friends and family fall away from the worship of the true God, that is discouraging. They once were right with you and now they’re not. They’re away from the Lord and their lives are darkened by sin. When there is open opposition and hostility, that is discouraging.

I have to tell you, this is a tool that Satan has often used to tempt me in my life. He has used discouragement. I have often thought it would be great to find some island where I could live free from all discouragement. Wouldn’t that be great? I could just find an island and live there. First, there is not an island that exists where you’re free from discouragement. If you go to some island, you’re going to find that Satan follows you there and you’re going to get discouraged.

Second, God didn’t place me here on this earth to live on some island. He just didn’t. He placed me here on this earth to be part of a worshiping community, to be part of His church, to be part of working and ministering for Him and unto Him all the way until the day I die. Then there is this great island in the sky that we’re going to be at forever and ever and there is not going to be any of this discouragement anymore. There will not be one bit of discouragement then. But that’s not now. Right now, God says to get ready. Prepare your hearts for battle.

Satan loves to weaken our worship by discouraging us.This is how he came after Jesus during His night in the Garden. Do you remember the night before Jesus went to the cross? What did Satan do to discourage Jesus? First he had one of the inner Twelve kiss Him on the cheek. Jesus said, “Judas, do you come to betray me with a kiss?” How discouraging is that? This is a person who you have lived with and walked with and loved for three years. Then He had the other eleven who were faithful. He said, “Just stay awake with me for just a little while. This is an hour of darkness. I need you to stay with me.” He comes back. “Peter, couldn’t you stay awake this little while? The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” How discouraging that would have had to have been. How tempted would Jesus have been to be discouraged? If Satan came after Jesus with the tool of discouragement, will he not come after you? Will he not come after me, too? We must expect him to tempt us with discouragement. When we see discouragement, may we remember as before, and may there be alarm bells ringing off in our head that shout “Satan is at work!” Put on the full armor.

Over the last two years, I have heard several believers who have said something that I have not heard much in all my life as a Christian. But I’ve heard several people, a number of people say this. They say something like, “I think I’m going to take a break away from church for a while.” I’ve never heard that except in the last couple years. I don’t find those words in Scripture. I don’t find any believer saying that. I know what drives it is discouragement. When people say, “I need to take a break,” I think somehow it’s because the people of God becomes a place of discouragement. I believe it’s Satan’s opposition to worship. I believe that’s what underlies it all. I think he is using discouragement to get us to disengage from Jesus’ new community. Is isolated worship of God easier? Yes. Again, we think, let’s find that island. Does neglecting the corporate worship honor God as He deserves to be honored? Absolutely not! He tells us so. God says, “Do not neglect the assembling of yourselves together as is the habit of some.” Don’t do that.

You’re going to get discouraged and you’re going to feel like doing that, but don’t let that happen. Ezra teaches us that God cares about the building of a temple for a people, His people, to gather together. Again, can you imagine an individual Jewish person leaving their home up in Babylon? Now they’ve become comfortable and then they go to Jerusalem and say, “I’m just going to be on my own over here.” No, they realized survival depends upon community engagement. While that might not be true economically like it was for them, it’s true spiritually for us. Our very survival depends upon this. Our worship of God depends upon these bonds that we lean into.

The bond of the nation was sacred to the Lord. We read about the tribes and how the tribes came together, and we read about individual people in Ezra 2 and 3, how they also came together to perform this work together, a work that they could never have accomplished on their own. If that’s true of the nation of Israel, how much more is it true of the new community where Jews and Gentiles come together as one in Christ Jesus after the Messiah comes? So God does care about our corporate worship. The New Testament parallel to the Old Testament temple is the church. We are the temple of God. Think about Ephesians 2 with me for a moment.

**Ephesians 2:18** For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

He’s talking about Jews and Gentiles alike.

**Ephesians 2:19** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,

In other words, you’re members of the same family, now. Family matters! You’re

**Ephesians 2:20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,

There is that temple analogy bleeding into this teaching about who we are as a church. We’re built upon the foundation first of Christ, but also of the apostles and prophets.

**Ephesians 2:20-21** …Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

That’s the vision. God says, “This is how I’m going to be glorified. This is how I’m going to be honored. It’s by having all these bricks, all these stones coming together and growing together into one, worshiping me.”

**Ephesians 2:22** In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

What can we do to overcome discouragement in our worship?

**God’s resource #2: Clinging to God’s promises.**

This people in Zerubbabel’s day knew that the reason that they returned to the land to rebuild the Temple and to worship Him was because God promised that they would do so. It was on the basis of the promise that they’re in the land in the first place.

**Jeremiah 29:10** “For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

“You’re going to be a worshipping people.” That’s the promise of God. They knew God is faithful to every promise every time. God is not going to let the Samaritan’s opposition frustrate His plan for their worship. So they placed their eyes on God’s promises regardless of the discouragement. I love Psalm 119:50!

**Psalm 119:50** This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.

If you want more life, look to the promises of God and know that they’re true, regardless of the discouragements. They’re the things that will keep our eyes off of that island and put our eyes back in the real world, where there are struggles and where there are discouragements, but where there is God in His glory. Amen? (Amen!)

**Satan’s Tool #3: Fear**

We’ll run through these rather quickly.

***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,*

I wish I could say that demonic opposition didn’t faze God’s people, but it did. It had a really big impact on them. The work on the temple stopped for 15 years. God had to send guys named Haggai and Zechariah to them to say it’s time to get back to the reason why I sent you into this land in the first place. For 15 years, they stopped building the temple. Fear is a powerful motivator. The only thing more powerful than fear to motivate a person is faith. Those are the two motivators that drive almost everything in life. It’s possible for us to begin to have this motivation of fear. Understand that fear is never ever, ever of the Lord. There is fear of the Lord, but not fear of anything else besides the Lord ever is from the Lord.

The fears of the people were many. Will we have enough money to finish the project we began? Are we going to be embarrassed because we’re not the wealthiest of people? Will our enemies attack us and kill us? Will we lose everything we’ve invested to get here? Will we be able to make a living to feed our children? What’s going to happen to our children? What’s going to happen to our grandchildren? These are real issues. Will we be able to protect our children in this hostile environment?

Satan loves to use fear to hinder our worship. He uses fear to paralyze us. He uses fear to back us away from radical commitment. He uses fear to change our focus away from the Lord and onto the troubles of this present world. Beloved, this kind of fear is never ever, ever from the Lord. Again, when we start to be afraid, allow that warning light to go off. This is Satan at work to discourage us, to impede us from worship. God addresses this very problem over and over and over when He says, “Fear not!”

**Isaiah 41:10** fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

“So don’t be afraid when you choose to follow me and you choose to commit your life to worship. Don’t be afraid that the cost is going to be great or that it’s going to end poorly for you. Don’t be afraid. I’m with you. I will uphold you.” What can we do when fear grips us?

**God’s Resource #3: Perseverance in the Spirit**

Worshipping God never happens without opposition. But God always gives us the resources to stand firm. Stand firm in the Lord without wavering. This is why Paul says

**Ephesians 6:10-11** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God,

Don’t give in to fear. Fight with the resources of the Gospel, with the Lord Jesus Christ as our mighty warrior fighting with us and for us, knowing that we’re more than conquerors through Him. Let’s dress ourselves with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what all those pieces of armor mean. It’s just to take the Gospel and start applying this Gospel, applying this salvation, apply the righteousness, apply the belt of truth, apply the sword of the Spirit. Keep your feet shod with the Gospel of peace, the peace that comes from the Gospel. All of these pieces of armor are related to the Gospel. Put the Gospel on every day and fight. The issue is, don’t give up. These people gave up for 15 years or more. God brought them back.

**Satan’s Tool #4: Slander**

Slander is false accusation. It’s interesting because the moment we jump into verses 6 and 7, we don’t realize it, but we’re jumping 50 years ahead of time when we go from verse 5 to verse 6. Then we’re jumping another 20 years between verse 6 and verse 7. You don’t catch that right away in a casual reading. Why would Ezra do that? Why would the first five verses be about a time that is 80 years prior and then most of the rest of the chapter be about a time where they just jump forward? The answer is because he is illustrating this issue of spiritual opposition. He says it happened back here with Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Now he jumps forward to his own day and he says it happens right here now in this day with Ahasuerus, Xerxes in Esther’s day, and with Artaxerxes.

What happened there was people wrote to these kings and they slandered. They said these people are just troublemakers. The thing with slander is most slander has part of it being true. Jerusalem had a problem in their history of actually breaking treaties with foreign rulers like the Babylonians, like the Assyrians, like the Egyptians. Jerusalem was a hotbed for turmoil. But they weren’t what the people claimed they were. There was slander against them.

Now, can you think of anybody else in the Bible who was slandered in order to knock him off his mission? Do you remember when Jesus was standing before the religious leaders and ultimately before Pontius Pilate? The religious leaders actually looked for people who would give false testimony about Jesus. Again, we see these tools used over and over all through Scripture, and this one here, the issue of slander. In John 8, Jesus says of the devil,

**John 8:44** You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

It ought not to surprise us that when we begin to worship God, when we begin to turn toward Him, that slander, false reports, twisted accusations would come against us. What is our resource for this? What do we do? The answer is we place ourselves under the cleansing of the blood of Jesus.

**God’s Resource #4: Cleansing by the blood**

Every accusation falls away from us when we place ourselves under the blood of Jesus Christ. Some parts of those accusations likely have some truth to them. Much of them likely have a lot of falsehood because Satan is a liar. Regardless, we place ourselves under the blood of Jesus Christ and all those accusations as we stand before God, we can be clean. We’re forgiven. Paul talks about putting on this breastplate of righteousness and I think that is this coming under the blood of Jesus Christ and receiving His righteousness so that accusations don’t cause us to think “I don’t deserve to be part of God’s family. I don’t deserve to be part of God’s worship. I don’t deserve to be part of God’s kingdom program.” We come underneath the blood of Jesus Christ, knowing that when we confess our sins before Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

**Satan’s Tool #5: Violence**

This is a threat usually coming from governments, although it just comes from powerful people. Here, it certainly came from governments. King Artaxerxes responds by allowing the Samaritans to force the Jews to stop. We’re not told how exactly. It’s undoubtedly through physical violence. It’s undoubtedly through tearing apart the aspects of the temple that they began building.

We are right to pray to God to protect us from violent assaults. Often, God hears us and rescues us from violent assaults, like Daniel in the lion’s den. He did that. But sometimes, God protects His people through violent assaults. In other words, He allows violent assaults to happen. Our Lord sometimes allows us to suffer under Satan’s violence. But beloved, our resource is this.

**God’s Resource #5: Hope in Christ’s Victory**

Who controls the heart and mind of King Artaxerxes? He put a stop by law and by physical violence to the progress. Who controls that person? Well, it’s God.

I think it’s really important for us today, as we see all kinds of aspects related to rulers making decisions that hinder the worship of God’s people, to be ready for whatever violence happens. It’s right for us to not be troubled by the orders of any political leaders. Friends, let us not let our hearts be troubled by anything. I know it’s hard not to let our hearts be troubled. There are a lot of things going on in countries around the world, countries real close to home, like Canada. Our own country threatens freedoms where the threat of violence or legal opposition may come against God’s people. But beloved, let us know who rules the world. The hand of God overrules the rulers. Amen? (Amen!) We ought not to read in the newspaper and get all troubled. We ought to read in the newspaper and pray. We ought to read in the newspaper and think about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is God’s resource that counters this physical violence. Hope in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the victorious king. He wins the war. For now, He allows really hard things for His people to experience. But one day, the end will come and it’s going to be a glorious end. We don’t look at the scoreboard in the first quarter. We know what’s going to happen at the end of the game. All who love the Lord Jesus will reign with Him in glory.

I love 1 Peter 5! I end with this verse. I encourage us all, let’s not lose heart. Let us fight with spiritual weapons, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, against the true enemy, not flesh and blood, but against Satan himself. Let’s fight for the right cause, which is the worship of our God, the honor of His name.

**1 Peter 5:8-11** Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.