

As the son of a teacher I moved a number of times. At the beginning of Yr 6 a new town, new school, new friends. Playing cricket in the street together. Getting into trouble in the classroom to earn their favour. As our first year at High School began eagerly anticipating the good times ahead. My so-called friends turned against me for reasons I've never understood. Making my life a misery with taunts, violence, stealing from me, isolating me in the playground. A painful life lesson about calculated opposition and its impact. My first year in a new town very positive. Similar to the opening three chapters of the Book of Ezra. A picture of joy and sunshine. A wonderful testimony of the gracious hand of God. Cyrus' proclamation. The first wave of God's people returning from exile. Abundantly endowed for the rebuilding project. The temple rebuild and people of God rebuild well underway. **Chapter 3** concludes with restored worship according to God's word. The foundations of the temple in place. This story is heading towards 'they lived happily ever after'. Yet the storm clouds are gathering. The ground about to shift dramatically in **ch 4-6**. I did not recognise the storm clouds gathering in my life back in Yr 6. Usually we are unaware of the timing and shape of impending opposition as Christians. However, advanced warning for the people of God returning to Jerusalem. We read at the beginning of **3:3**, *'Despite their fear of the peoples around them...'* Something in the attitude of the locals grows fear in the hearts of God's people. The reasons for fear emerge in today's reading. Opposition is unmasked. Brothers and sisters, are you currently facing opposition to your Christian faith? Is your Christian life smooth sailing at the moment? Are there recent events in your life discouraging you to persevere in serving God? Whatever your answers these chapters speak to us. May we have ears to hear. The events recorded in Ezra take place in a well verified period of ancient history. Historical records external to the Bible enable us to understand the timeline for these events. Alluded to in Ezra with references to months and years in the reign of Persian kings. The timeline difficult to recognise in our reading of Ezra. The first 6 chapters cover the reign of five kings over approximately 80 years. Today's passage recounts two seasons of opposition against God's people during those 80 years. **Verses 1-5, 24** during the reign of Cyrus and Darius when the temple is built. **Verses 6-23** during the reign of Xerxes and Artaxerxes when the people of God seek to rebuild the city and its protective wall. The opposition unmasked in this chapter begins after the laying of the temple foundation. The narrative helps us understand and unmask

the origins and weapons of opposition. Better preparing us for Christian living in the face of opposition.

First, origins. A spiritual origin to opposition. The source of opposition in the passage: enemies of God. *'When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel,' v1.* Identified as enemies of God's people. But when you oppose God's people you oppose God. As Jesus says, *'If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.'* **John 15:18**

Sometimes Christians are given a hard time by others because they act like mugs. We all need to guard against that. This is not the case here. Opposition arises because this temple building project is for the God of Israel. One suspects a temple project to honour some Persian deity would not have attracted such opposition. Sisters and brothers, the real origin of this opposition is the unseen hand of Satan. The locals in Jerusalem knowingly or unknowingly part of his team. In the words of Paul, *'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'* **Ephesians 6:12**

Recognise your true enemy as a Christian. Understand the devil uses people to cause havoc in God's world. **Second**, weapons of opposition. Whatever it takes. Champion tennis player, Victoria Azarenka said, *"Awkward gestures, clumsy gestures, fist pumps. I just do whatever I feel like is right in the moment. If I need to be hyped, I'm hyped. If I need to talk to myself, I talk to myself. Whatever it takes to win, I'm going to do it."* Enemies of God's people do whatever it takes to win; to try and overturn God's purposes. Revealed in this chapter. Bribery of government officials **v5**, false accusations and half-truths **v12-13**, physical force **v23**. The whatever it takes principle has a basic goal. Pursued persistently until it is achieved. Discouragement. *'Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.'* **v4** It worked. The people of God were discouraged by persistent opposition during the reign of Cyrus and Darius. They gave up, got distracted. The building of the temple was halted for approximately 20 years. *'Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.'* **v24**

Brothers and sisters, when there are periods of discouragement in following Christ. When your Christian life has lost its spark and fire. When you lose your vibrant love for Christ. When obedience to God's word is a threat to doing what you want. Examine your life. Ask God to reveal the weapons the evil one is using to discourage you. People and circumstances. Obvious and in your face or hidden and subtle.

So you might stand against the discouragement. Another weapon in the passage. Spiritual seduction. A cunning weapon of the evil one. Compromising the integrity of undivided commitment to the God of Israel. On display in **v2** through the offer of assistance in the building project. From people claiming to be spiritually just like the Jews. Seeking Israel's God and sacrificing to him. In reality, multi faith worshippers. Blending the Jewish sacrificial system with idol worship imported from their Assyrian origins. Being part of the building project opens the door to shaping the worship that follows. Dishonouring the God who declares he is the one and only true God. Damaging the spiritual rebuilding of God's people. Thankfully at this point the danger recognised. *But Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us."* **v3** If you are encouraged to express your support for followers of other faiths in the form of multi faith worship remember the words of Jesus. *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:6* Multi faith worship compromises the gospel and dishonours Jesus. Sisters and brothers, opposition to your walk with Jesus will take many shapes and forms. Be alert. Nothing you attempt for God will go unchallenged by the evil one. Don't be surprised by his range of tactics. But as we shall see in the chapters to come this is not the end of the story for God's people in Jerusalem. Nor does it need to be the end of your story if you are discouraged in your Christian life. Distracted from doing God's work. Weighed down by the multiple fronts of attack from the evil one. Take heart from what unfolds as the story continues. Over the next two weeks we will discover the hand of God is mightier than the hand of Satan.