

# Our Wrestle Against This Present Darkness

*Ezra 4:1–7, 24*

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Pastor Trent Eastman

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## D-Day and a Narrative Technique

This past Friday marked the 81st anniversary of D-Day — the day Allied forces launched the largest amphibious invasion in history on the beaches of Normandy, France, with 160,000 troops. D-Day marks the beginning of the end for Nazi Germany. What I consider the very best historical depiction of that day, and frankly the best World War II film ever made, is *Saving Private Ryan*. The movie actually begins at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial, sixty years after D-Day. It opens with an elderly gentleman and his family visiting the cemetery, and as he falls to his knees at a grave, the audience is taken back through his eyes to June 6, 1944, on that same beach. The film ends by bringing us forward again to the present day, to that same older man — who we now know is the elderly Ryan. It is not only the finest war film ever made; it is one of the best films of all time. And this technique of flashing backward and then forward in time adds a whole other layer of meaning to the story, a depth that simply could not have been achieved by telling events in chronological order.

This same narrative tool — flashing backward and then flashing forward in time — is used in Ezra 4, our text today. And just as in *Saving Private Ryan*, it adds a dimension of meaning to what our passage is communicating to us that we would otherwise miss entirely.

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## Setting the Stage: The Return and the Rebuilding

We are in a study of Ezra and Nehemiah — originally one book, divided into two at the time of the printing press. Together, Ezra-Nehemiah tells the hundred-year story of the exiles who returned to Judah and Jerusalem.

It begins in Ezra 1 with God stirring the heart of Cyrus to issue the decree allowing the people to return home. The Lord not only stirred the heart of the Persian king; he stirred the hearts of nearly 50,000 exiles to make that journey and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. We read this plainly in Ezra 1:5:

*“Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.”*

Reading on in Ezra 1, you will see that these returning exiles also received 5,400 gold and silver vessels belonging to the house of the Lord, along with many animals and what amounts to roughly forty million dollars’ worth of gold and silver. The point is simply this: God stirred his people to rebuild the house of the Lord, he provided the way, he called them, and he equipped them according to his calling and purposes.

The first thing the people do upon arriving is build an altar at the temple site and begin sacrifices as prescribed by the law. Eight months later, they began the work of laying the foundation for the temple. And when that foundation was completed, they celebrated. Trumpets were blown, cymbals rang out, singers lifted their voices, and the whole congregation — thousands of people — shouted together,

*“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel” (Ezra 3:11).*

The old wept when they saw the house, and the young shouted for joy. Ezra 3 ends by telling us that the sound of the celebration was heard far away — which means it was heard by the people of the land. And it is with those people of the land that our passage today begins.

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## **The Adversaries Appear: Ezra 4:1–3**

Open your Bible to Ezra 4, and let us begin to read.

*“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’” (Ezra 4:1–2).*

Here is the first flash backward in time. Esarhaddon king of Assyria was 132 years in the past. In 722 BC, Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and exiled its people into the larger Assyrian world. And just as Assyria removed the conquered people of Israel from the land, they also brought people from other conquered territories and resettled them in what had once been the kingdom of Israel. You can read about this in 2 Kings 17.

A very important point in all of this: many people in the ancient world believed that gods were bound by location. There was a god of the mountains, a god of the valley, a god of Assyria, a

god of Babylon. For a people to thrive in a land, they needed to worship the god of that land. And so the people resettled into Israel by Esarhaddon were told about Yahweh as the God of that territory, and they simply added Yahweh to their existing worship alongside all their other gods and idols. If these people became partners in rebuilding the temple with the returned exiles, the temple would be a temple to *a* god — not *the* God. It would be a place where the Lord God of Israel was honored among a pantheon of other deities. The people of Judah knew rightly that there is but one God, the Lord of heaven and earth, and there is no other. There was no way they could rebuild the temple of the Lord and allow it to become a place of idols. And so they rightly say no.

*“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’” (Ezra 4:3).*

A significant side note is worth pausing on here. These people resettled by Esarhaddon — who were taught about Yahweh and worshiped him alongside their other gods — will eventually become known as the Samaritans we encounter in the New Testament. Ezra 4, our passage today, is the opening chapter of the story of why Jews and Samaritans despised one another.

Notice also what the returned exiles affirm in this verse: they are to rebuild the house of the Lord, and even King Cyrus has commanded them to do so. This is why they returned. God stirred their hearts; the Lord gave them everything they needed to accomplish what he called them to do. They acknowledge all of this. And then something happens.

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## **Sixteen Years of Silence: Ezra 4:4–5**

*“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” (Ezra 4:4–5).*

From 536 BC to 520 BC — sixteen years — the people who had been called and equipped by God to rebuild the temple did nothing. They did not do what God had called them to do. Why? We are told exactly why. They became afraid. They became discouraged. And as we will see when we look at the prophet Haggai, they became distracted. Fear, discouragement, and distraction became the tools of their adversaries to keep them from doing what God had called them to do.

We are not told in this passage precisely what the adversaries did beyond bribing officials. Those who were bribed held political power, and while they could not openly defy Cyrus' decree, they could make the rebuilding process enormously difficult — making it hard, for example, to find, purchase, and transport materials. But it was more than mere logistics. The adversaries discouraged the people and made them afraid, and the work stopped for sixteen years.

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## **The Flash Forward: Opposition Never Ends**

What makes Ezra 4 so striking is that the opposition described here does not end when the temple is finally completed. The next eighteen verses — all set in the future, after the temple is finished — make this unmistakably clear.

Verse 6 is a flash forward of fifty years:

“*And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem*” (Ezra 4:6).

And verses 7 through 23 flash forward eighty to ninety years into the future:

“*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*” (Ezra 4:7).

I will not read the entire letter, but let me jump to verse 11:

“*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. 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*” (Ezra 4:11–13).

Notice what is absent from this letter: any mention of the temple. Because the temple is finished. This accusation, which likely took place during the thirteen years between Ezra and Nehemiah — around 450 BC — comes roughly ninety years after the exiles first returned and seventy years after the temple was completed. And reading on from there, you will find that Artaxerxes orders the work on the city walls to stop.

The point the author of Ezra-Nehemiah is making through this narrative structure is impossible to miss: there was never a moment when the people of God did not have adversaries seeking to hinder them from doing what God had called them to do. The book of Nehemiah gives us the full picture of what those tactics looked like in practice — mockery and insults (Nehemiah 4:1–3), physical threats (Nehemiah 4:7–11), political accusations (Nehemiah 6:5–7), false peace talks (Nehemiah 6:1–4), false prophecy (Nehemiah 6:10–14), and internal compromise through the bribery of Jewish nobles (Nehemiah 6:17–19). Flash forward another two hundred years to the time of the Greeks — the opposition is still there. Another two hundred years to the time of the Romans — still there. There was never a season in which the returned exiles did not face adversaries working to stop, limit, or discourage the people of God from doing what God had called and equipped them to do.

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## A Spiritual Truth for Today

This points us to a critically important spiritual truth: there will always be adversaries, both seen and unseen, working to hinder the work of God. Which means that for us — followers of Jesus — we will always encounter opposition in this world that seeks to stop, limit, or discourage us from fulfilling God’s calling and purpose in our lives. That is the spiritual reality we live in.

Jesus tells us this plainly:

| *“You will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Luke 21:17).*

And again:

| *“If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19).*

Peter puts it this way:

| *“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8–9).*

And Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, describes the deeper reality beneath all of it:

| *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, 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” (Ephesians 6:12).*

We need to see this clearly: opposition to your faith is not something that happens “out there” in the world to other people. It happens to you, to all of us, regardless of spiritual maturity. Scripture says,

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

If you are a person who seeks to follow Jesus, you have adversaries working against you. Now, those adversaries may not take the form of bribed officials or physical threats. But you will encounter voices that mock your convictions. There will be pressure upon you to disobey what you know to be true and right. There will be a constant stream of lies quietly diluting truth. There will be subtle nudges knocking you off your priorities, and really good-sounding arguments designed to get you to compromise your beliefs.

Can you relate? Have you ever tried to prioritize prayer in your life, only to find that distractions suddenly multiply? Have you taken a step of obedience, only to be hit with discouragement? Have you committed to deeper Bible study, only to find your schedule becomes impossible to manage? Have you chosen to serve others sacrificially, only to find relationships strained and your motives questioned? Have you felt led to tithe faithfully, only for unexpected expenses to pile up all at once? Have you tried to share the gospel with a friend, only to be interrupted at the very moment you were ready to speak? Have you stepped out to use your gifts for God’s kingdom, only to be met with self-doubt and criticism?

The same forces that sought to frustrate the builders of the temple still seek to frustrate the building of your life in Christ. And unless we recognize this as a spiritual battle, we will interpret our struggles merely as inconvenience or personal failure. But they are not. They are part of the spiritual war that rages around every act of faithfulness.

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## **The Third Enemy: Distraction**

What is particularly interesting is that when the prophet Haggai appears sixteen years after the work stopped, he does not challenge the people on the basis of fear or discouragement. He challenges them on the basis of their comfort.

In a sermon dated precisely to August 29, 520 BC, Haggai accuses the returned exiles of neglecting the temple not because they were terrified, but because they were preoccupied with their own lives:

“Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.” (Haggai 1:2)

*“Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house” (Haggai 1:4–5, 9).*

According to Haggai, the returned exiles failed to do what God called and equipped them to do not because of fear or discouragement, but because they were distracted. They were absorbed in building their own homes, tending their farms, settling into their routines. Distraction is one of the great enemies of the soul in every generation — and it is perhaps the most dangerous one in ours.

We live at a time of unprecedented distraction. Every moment of our day is crowded with noise — notifications, news cycles, emails, entertainment, endless obligations. Like the returned exiles, most of us are not running from God or rejecting his call outright. We are just busy. We are busy building our own paneled houses — our careers, our families, our reputations — while God’s calling and purpose for our lives lies neglected, not out of defiance, but distraction.

The people in Haggai’s day were not atheists or apostates. They were farmers and builders, parents and workers — ordinary people trying to rebuild their lives after the trauma of exile. But somewhere along the way, survival turned into self-focus, and self-focus curdled into spiritual stagnation. They had forgotten the purpose for which God brought them back to Jerusalem in the first place: to rebuild the temple, to reestablish the worship of the living God in the land.

The same drift can happen to us. God did not save us so that we could construct comfortable, insulated lives. He called us to seek first his kingdom — to make his presence, his glory, and his mission the foundation of everything we do. But the tyranny of the urgent, the pull of the practical, and the lure of comfort slowly redirect our attention from his kingdom to our own wood-paneled lives. And when God’s people are distracted, mission becomes maintenance, devotion becomes duty, worship music becomes background noise, obedience becomes optional, evangelism becomes embarrassing, faith becomes feelings, ministry becomes meetings, church becomes a social club, prayer becomes ritual, and Scripture serves only as a source for motivational sayings.

Therefore, in the words of Haggai the prophet: consider your ways.

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## How Do We Stand? Ephesians 6:10–18

Ezra 4 does not show us how the people, through the Lord, overcame the fear, discouragement, and distraction they faced. We will read about that next week in Ezra 5 and 6. But I do not want to end today on a cliffhanger, especially if you are in the midst of a spiritual battle right now.

In Ephesians 6, Paul gives us a powerful image of how we are to live in light of this present darkness. I want to close by reading Ephesians 6:10–18 once more, and I want you to listen carefully to how we are called to respond to the fears, discouragements, and distractions caused by our adversaries — and sometimes by our own hearts:

*“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, 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. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”*

The belt of truth — because truth anchors the soul. The lies of the adversary only produce fear and confusion; truth cuts through both. The breastplate of righteousness — because the adversary, who is the accuser, is always pointing at what you have done wrong, always whispering that you are not good enough, that you are a failure, that God does not really care about you. The breastplate of righteousness is Christ’s righteousness given to you — the righteousness through which God sees you and welcomes you. The shoes of the gospel of peace — because the gospel of Jesus Christ, who through his death and resurrection has reconciled us to God and brought us peace, is the greatest message, blessing, and power for good in this world. Be ready to share it. That is, in its own way, how we fight back in this spiritual battle.

The shield of faith will be one of our key points of focus next week. Faith is the means by which we live in this world and confront every adversary. The helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit — we will spend time here next week as well — because the assurance of salvation and the power of God’s Word is how we cut through the world’s distractions and deceit.

And finally: prayer. *Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.* Today is Pentecost Sunday — the day the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church, poured out upon everyone who confesses that Jesus is Lord. You and I are not alone in this present darkness. God has given us himself, his Spirit.

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## **Stand Firm**

Brothers and sisters, as we stand in this present darkness, let us not be surprised by the resistance we face — but neither let us be overwhelmed by it. The same God who stirred the hearts of his people to return and rebuild, who spoke through the prophet Haggai, who poured out his Spirit on Pentecost, is with us still. Your calling is not to retreat in fear, nor to be lulled into comfort and distraction, but to stand firm — clothed in truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and the Word of God, empowered by his Spirit.

So yes — consider your ways. But more than that, consider your Savior, and press on in the strength of his might. The battle is real, but so is the victory.

Stand firm.