When Opposition Comes

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[0:00] Shall we pray? Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus. We thank you that you sent him to die on the cross for our sin. We thank you that he has risen again to be our Lord. And we thank you that he speaks to us even this morning. And we pray, Lord, even right now, when Satan wants to prevent your word being heard, that you will not allow him to do so. But let your word be spoken powerfully to us by your spirit so that it might shape our outlook on life and shape our life together. So prepare our hearts, we pray, to hear your word. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Now, what invention in your car do you think has saved more lives than any other? That's right, it's your humble seatbelt. From the very beginning, seatbelts have always helped reduce fatalities. So clearly they're good, right? Yet you'll be surprised by how many people disagree. In 1968, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in America required all cars to have seatbelts. But that's when the resistance started. Some drivers hated them so much that they cut them up. Others began challenging seatbelt laws in court. They argued, amongst other things, that their body was their body and they shouldn't be forced to do things against their will to their body, including putting a seatbelt over it. In 1982, when an American legislator began introducing seatbelt laws in his state, he received hate mail comparing him to Hitler. Around the same time, another radio host collected 45,000 petitions and managed to force a referendum to repeal these laws in another state. So even though wearing seatbelts is pretty much common sense, the opposition was intense. You see, opposition can appear even when you're advocating something good. And that's true even when it comes to the very things of God. Opposition can be intense even when you're doing God's mission.

[2:27] That's the reality. That's something Jesus warn us about. In John 15 verse 20 and 21, speaking to his disciples for the final time, before he goes to the cross, Jesus says this on the screen.

So Jesus is clear.
If we follow him, we can expect opposition. We can expect disparagement. We can expect ill treatment. That was certainly the experience of the Apostle Paul as he went about doing the Lord's work.
Listen to how he describes his ministry in 1 Corinthians 16 verse 8 and 9. But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost because a great door for effective work has opened to me.
And there are many who oppose me. Gospel opposition will often appear alongside gospel opportunity. And that's true as well even in the book of Ezra.

[3:58] Now so far it's all been pretty happy, hasn't it? In Ezra chapters 1 and 2, we find God so orchestrating things that a Persian king would allow over 40,000 of God's people to come home and to rebuild the temple, complete with the original temple vessels.

So that is one step forward. And in Ezra 3, we find them rebuilding the altar, sourcing the required materials, and even laying the foundation of the temple, culminating in a celebration.
So that's two steps forward. But now, in Ezra 4, we find them facing significant opposition for the first time.
That's one step back. And in fact, we'll discover the opposition is significant enough that the work of building actually stops.
That's two steps back. There's a spiritual high followed by a spiritual low. So how should we deal with this?

[5:15] Well, that's what Ezra 4 to 6 is all about. Today, we're just looking at Ezra 4, but I think it's helpful to think of this chapter as one of two parts.

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So today, part 1, we'll be looking at how opposition works. We'll think today about how opposition affects us. And then next week, part 2, we'll be looking at how God works in the face of opposition. And our elder, Dr. Ng Hong Baq will work through Ezra 5 verse 1 to 6 verse 12 to help us see that. But come with me now to Ezra chapter 4.
And I think it's also helpful to make one more preliminary comment before we proceed. Now, I don't know about you, but the first time I read through chapter 4, I was a bit confused with what's happening.
But what helped me was when I realized that Ezra chapter 4 is not strictly chronological. So let me try to clue you in a bit on the timeline.
[6:21] If you look at Ezra chapter 4 verse 1 to 5, it's talking about the time of King Cyrus up to the time of King Darius. Now, you can see that in verse 5.

And if you jump down to verse 24, you can see we're still talking about Darius' time. So you can read verses 1 to 5 and then skip down to verse 24 as if it is a direct continuation.
But what about the verses in between? Well, think of verses 6 to 23 as a bit of a flash forward. In verse 6, we jump ahead to the reign of King Cyrus, who is probably the same king you meet in the book of Esther.
And in verses 7 to 23, we jump to the time of the king after him. Arthur Cyrus. And by the time of Arthur Cyrus, the temple has been completed.
But there is still opposition. This time, to the rebuilding of the city walls. So to put it in table form, the timeline will look something like this.
[7:37] It's also on your handout. So if it's not appearing on the screen, just look at your handout. Ah, there it is. Okay. So you can see there, 4 verse 1 to 5 and 24, it's the reign of Cyrus and then Darius.

And then 4 verse 6 to 23, you can see we're in the time of success and then Arthur's success. And that's a bit further ahead in time. Now, why does the writer arrange his material in this way?
Well, I think there are a couple of reasons, but let me just give you one for now. It seems he writes like this to show that in every era where God's work is to be found, there will be opposition.
It's inevitable. And it comes from all sorts of sources in all sorts of ways. That's why he groups these stories together to make this point.
And in this way, he can also prepare his readers. He helps us see that opposition comes in different forms and it impacts us differently.
[8:47] And so let's consider these different impacts now. Firstly, when opposition comes, we might compromise. We might compromise.

Now, we know from last week, the temple's finally being built. Hooray! And now it looks like there is more good news, verse 2.
Some people approach the leadership and they say, Let us help you, because like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon, king of Azariah, who brought us here.
What a friendly offer! How nice of them! It's not every day that you get eager volunteers ready to take on more work, especially when you could always do with more hands.
And besides, doesn't it look like these guys have a lot in common with us? They say they worship the same God. They've been through the experience of exile.
[9:49] And they have the same enthusiasm to build. So it looks like we have a common background, a common religion, and a common goal. We are practically the same.

But given all this, you would have thought the leaders would immediately say, Yes! Thank you! Thank you! Which is why verse 3 comes as a bit of a surprise.
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.
Now, we alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us. They rejected this offer outright.
Wow! Talk about being a wet blanket. Is it because they are so tribal? You know, this is my territory.
[10:50] Don't intrude on it. Is it because they are so narrow-minded? Or maybe these leaders are a bit rigid, a bit dogmatic. And aren't they being a little bit rude?

Couldn't they maybe give these guys just a little responsibility? But God's word itself tells us that they were right to do so.

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You see, look back at verse 1 and notice how these people are described. Are they allies? Are they supporters?
No! Verse 1 makes clear they are enemies. And indeed, if we look a little closer at verse 2, they expose themselves as such.
Notice how they mention Esarhaddon, king of Assyria. That should raise a red flag. These are the people, you see, whom the Assyrians had resettled more than a century ago.
[11:56] And Esarhaddon, their king, had taken many people from places like Babylon and brought them to the northern part of Israel.

2 Kings chapter 17 verse 24 tells us the story. And in 2 Kings chapter 24 verse 27 to 28, We're told that one of the priests came to teach them how to worship the Lord.
But here is the problem. Let me read from 2 Kings 17 verse 29. I hope it will appear on the screen. If not, you can turn there, 2 Kings 17 verse 29.
Put a finger in Ezra 4 and just turn to 2 Kings 17 verse 29. And I'm going to read from verses 29 to 33. Verse 29.
So now we know.
[13:54] They might appear the same, but they are not the same. Sure, they kind of worship the God of Israel, but they worship Him only as one of many gods.

They certainly didn't worship Him the way the true people of God do. In fact, these people were engaging in the very sort of idolatrous behavior that caused God's glory to leave the temple in the first place and for God's people to be exiled.
And so the leaders knew that a sharp line had to be drawn. It was precisely because both parties look similar on the outside that our returnees from Babylon had to distinguish themselves clearly.
And so, verse 3, they made clear that there is an us and there is a them. You have no part with us, they say.
Notice how instead of using the generic word for God, as the enemies did, they made sure to use the personal name of God.
[15:13] Yahweh. That's what the word Lord in capital letters mean. They knew Yahweh. They knew His will.

And so they could not compromise. And they were right to do so. In verses 4 and 5, which we'll look at in slightly more detail in a moment, the true colors of these people are exposed.
You see, genuine Yahweh worshippers would have been happy for the building work to be carried out, whether or not they were involved. They certainly wouldn't have worked against it.
But these people did. Turns out their intentions aren't so noble after all. You see, how does opposition to God's work happen?
It doesn't always come in the form of overt hostility. No, it comes in disguise. Sometimes, opponents of God come saying, Hey, we're on the same side, aren't we?
[16:28] We worship your God as you do. So why don't we join hands together? And that is how God's ultimate adversary, Satan, works.

He loves to disguise himself as the angel of light. He tells half-truths as he does to Adam and Eve. He can quote scripture as he does to Jesus.
And so discernment is needed. Praise God, the leaders in Ezra 4 had that quality. They discerned rightly.
They discerned rightly. And they bravely said, No. It must have been tempting to accept those additional resources. But they couldn't do it at the expense of God's glory and his people's purity.
So, we must be on our guard against any inducements to compromise. Now, today is easy, isn't it, to downplay our differences with other religious groupings.
[17:43] Perhaps we might say, Oh, don't we both worship one God anyway? Don't we respect the same prophets? Don't we respect the same prophets? Even if we just happen to disagree on the identity of one of those prophets?

Or perhaps we might say, Well, we more or less have the same Bible anyway. We might even use similar Christian terminology. So, it's okay, even if it turns out that our views of Jesus are not the same, or what we mean by words like grace is actually very different.
We don't want to be seen as intolerant or somehow sympathetic to religious extremism. And certainly, when it comes to issues like fighting for religious freedom, or perhaps taking a common stand against an obvious form of injustice, there could be room for cooperation.

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But in Ezra 4, what is at stake here is nothing less than the work of rebuilding the temple. It's kingdom work.
It's the work of making God's name known, helping people come into his presence, and strengthening his people for worship. It's the work of the gospel.
[19:10] And when it comes to that kind of work, there is a sharp line to be drawn. Sometimes in Sarawak, there can be a temptation to go for the lowest common denominator as the basis for working together.

So, when someone says, Hey, we worship God too, just as you do. So, why don't we work together? Or at least come together?
And of course, we automatically want to be inclusive. But Ezra 4 verse 1 to 3 shows us today inclusiveness in itself is not the right criteria.
Rather, it is loyalty to the gospel as revealed in the scriptures. There must not be anything done that will obscure the distinctiveness of the gospel that says it is in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of God's authoritative word alone, that we can know God for his glory alone.
Because when that is compromised, people's opportunity and ability to know God is compromised. And when that is compromised, the gospel that brings about true inclusivity, bringing together male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, is robbed of its power.
[20:53] And so sometimes, we must actually say no to offers of cooperation. If we are in leadership positions, sometimes we must make unpopular decisions.

And when we say no, that can come at a cost. And that brings us to the next way opposition can impact us.
Secondly, when opposition comes, we might get discouraged. We might get discouraged. You see, when we take a stand, it can expose people's true motives.
And it can actually stir up more opposition. That's certainly what happened to Zerubbabel and his company. Look at verse 4. Then the people around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.
Now, how did they do this? We're not told in detail. Perhaps they began mocking their efforts, saying, see, without our help, you're so slow, you're not effective, you can't do anything.
[22:13] Is God really on your side? Or perhaps they said stuff like, well, go ahead and build. You'll probably get torn down again. Didn't that happen to your first temple?

And the opposition can be effective. The phrase set out to discourage in the Hebrew language is literally to weaken the hands.
And that's exactly what happened. The people were afraid. They felt intimidated. And their heads and their hands dropped, no longer doing the work.
After a look at how far these enemies were willing to go in verse 5, they were prepared to pay professional help to make sure things don't go according to plan.
perhaps the Persian authorities agreed to some duet kopi to make sure that some of the planning permissions were delayed or some of the imported wood diverted.
[23:22] And look at how long this kind of harassment goes on for. Verse 5 says it goes on during the entire reign of King Cyrus and down to the reign of King Darius.

Now if you remember the table that was on the screen just now, that means this kind of steady discouragement went on for well over a decade.
This was not a one-off. This was a relentless campaign. So no wonder the people felt defeated.
In verse 24 we discover the work did indeed come to a stop until the second year of King Darius. So that is 16 years in total.
The prophet Haggai tells us that the people slowly but surely began getting caught up in building their own nice houses rather than God's house.
[24:27] The zeal they began with had disappeared. You see discouragement is one of Satan's favourite tools. He loves to deploy it to stop the work of God.

Perhaps he says you can't do what God wants you to do. You can't love that person. It's just too hard. You can't serve in that ministry.
It's just too much. You can't go to Bible study. It's just too tough. So you don't do it. And the good works God has prepared for you to do stops.

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Perhaps he says God doesn't do what you want him to do. You want to see your children or your Sunday school kids make progress but your repeated patient instruction hasn't borne any visible fruit as of yet.
You want to see your witness before your unbelieving family cause them to change but every day they still misunderstand and criticize you. And you start saying to yourself must I go on as God wants?
[25:48] And the good works God has prepared for you to do talks. Perhaps Satan chose obstacle after obstacle in your way. You've tried hard to talk to your unbelieving friend but there's always something that stops him from hearing the gospel properly.

Some engagement some distraction sometimes there's even intimidation. I remember one time years ago during our college ministry when a lady an outsider tried to come in and take over and run things her way.
And when I stopped her she got angry and scolded me. You're just a young bastard who doesn't know anything. You have no clue. Don't you know who I am?
I didn't by the way. I'll complain about you. She wanted to intimidate me. And Satan knows discouragement can be contagious.
In fact the hand with discouragement and soon the feet will feel it. And so the whole body becomes weaker.
[27:09] So when opposition comes we might get discouraged. That's probably why the scriptures keep telling us over and over do not be afraid.

Do not lose heart because discouragement is real. It's real because opposition is real.
And it is not us spiritual to feel discouragement. But discouragement is a battle we must fight. Jesus says let not your hearts be troubled.
Let not your hope be overruled by what you can see. Let not your faith be choked. Instead let your heart be guarded by the peace of Christ.
Let your hope be in what you cannot see and let your faith be strengthened by the promises of God. Be ready because Satan has yet more to throw at us.
[28:20] For now thirdly when opposition comes we might get discredited. We might get discredited. We come now to verses 6 to 23.

In verse 6 we are told that there's an accusation made against God's people so the intimidation doesn't stop. But we're not told exactly the nature of that complaint.
But what we do have in verse 7 onwards is another more detailed episode. Now what's going on here? Well in verses 7 to 10 we're told that a group of influential people got together to write a letter to the king.
Now notice this complaint has the backing of high-ranking people. They are senior advisors, government officials, judges.
And it comes from different places. Tripolis, Persia, Iraq, Babylon, and Susa. So this lends the letter credibility and legitimacy.
[29:28] But what do they say? Well look at how they speak. Verse 12. the king should know that the people who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city.

So straight away notice the strong language. Jerusalem is rebellious and wicked. They're bad. They're wrong. They're immoral. Now these are just assertions without any evidence.
You know in verse 15 they talk about how this city is troublesome and seditious. And then in verse 16 they suggest that if the rebuilding continues, the Persian king will be left with nothing.
Is that really true? It's a rewriting of history. And today God's people continue to be subjected to such heated language.
Now I should say that occasionally the church deserves it. In history sometimes the church has got it badly wrong and are indeed guilty of wicked behaviour.
[30:42] And if that's the case we need to repent. when that happens. But sometimes the church is branded as fundamentalist or on the wrong side of history simply because we do not endorse what the world endorses.

Sometimes the church is slandered simply because people do not accept what God's word says. It's not us. It's them.

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God's people. And then verse 13 more misrepresentations follow. Once again without any evidence it is asserted that God's people won't pay taxes.
And they frame it in a personal way. The royal revenues will suffer. In other words, you king aren't going to get your money.
once again aspersions are cast on God's people. Their name is dragged through the mud.
Meanwhile, verse 14, the people also make sure to engage in some flattery to make sure that the king warms up to them.
[31:55] We tell you this because we care so much about your honour, they say. And it works. That's the thing. It works.

Look at verses 19 to 22. Now, remember, it was from a Persian throne that this work began. But now, it is also from a Persian throne that this work stops.
The king is swayed by the latter. He says, no more. But that's how fierce opposition can get. Like it or not, sometimes powerful figures will conspire against God's people.
They harness the power of false accusation and they get the authorities on their side. Isn't it true that at times during political campaigns, the Christian community often gets accused of all sorts of untrue things?
people and some believe them? Isn't that how Satan loves to work as well? If he's not deceiving people, he loves to falsely accuse.
[33:10] And it has always been true that where God's gospel is actively at work, corrupt people in power are threatened too. Think of Haman in the book of Esther, threatened by Mordecai and therefore resolving to destroy all God's people.

Think of Herod in the New Testament, threatened by the birth of a new king of the Jews and therefore seeking to kill all the babies.
The gospel, you see, is a message that Jesus is Lord. And that is a message that has public consequences. Because if Jesus is Lord, that means no one else is.
And that's why people in power who do not follow God cannot leave Christians alone. Such a message is dangerous to them.
So those are some of the different forms of opposition and how they impact us. But the question then becomes, when opposition comes, how can we prepare?
[34:30] Well, some of the answers will only come next week. So you've got to come back to hear from Dr. Hong Park. But for today, let me suggest two steps of preparation we can take.

Number one, have realistic expectations. expectations. Have realistic expectations. Ezra chapter 4, I think, is here to give us a dose of realism.
You see, if we are serious about living for God and building for God, then we must expect to encounter opposition. salvation. Whether it's the work of bringing up your family in the ways of Jesus, or the work of helping each other mature in Christ, whenever we engage in God's reformacy movement, progress will rarely be uninterrupted.
Satan is prowling like a lion, and he's more than happy to use all of his tools. He can be direct, he can be subtle, he can use the whispers of people, he can use the orders of governments.
And didn't Jesus face such opposition too? The devil tried to get him to compromise, turn these stones into bread. The devil tried to discourage him.
[36:03] Look at all your disciples abandoning you. The devil whipped up false accusations against him. at his trial. And so, it is no surprise that Jesus' followers should expect those things sometimes to happen to us too.

And the truth is, sometimes, in the short term, it looks like the devil has the victory. Jesus dies. The good guys don't always win. the Christians are killed. The church shrinks. The workers get fewer. And so, sometimes, we do get afraid.
Sometimes, we are so overwhelmed by circumstances, we get discouraged. Sometimes, we think of the poor choices we might have made. And we feel Satan's accusations against us have some merit.
And the Bible is utterly realistic about that. So, sometimes, the work stops. In Ezra, it stopped for 16 years.
[37:18] And sometimes, God allows quite long periods of time to pass without him acting to bring about renewal or reformation.

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And I think that's also another reason why the writer tells the story the way he does. By jumping forward in time from verse 5 to verse 6, before returning to the story of the temple rebuilding in verse 24, he is forcing his listeners to the story to wait before we find out what happens next.
It's like a movie where you're at a critical part, time, but suddenly it shifts perspective to a different time, forcing you to wait for the resolution and thereby increasing the tension.
And that tension is the same tension we feel living for Christ now, when we have to wait before it seems as if God does something.
And so we need Ezra 4 to help us have the right expectations. If we are not to unfairly blame God.
But here's another step.
[38:34] Number two, live by faith and don't give up. Live by faith and don't give up. Now this chapter of course is the low after the high.

But I think there are enough hints here and there to remind us that this cannot be the end of the story. it's a high and then it's a low. There's going to be a high again.
Don't forget the context. Last week, what were the people praising God for? They were singing 3 verse 11, He is good, His love towards Israel and Dios forever.
Now did you hear that? God is good, His love and Dios. Now what's that final word? Forever. And God has proven it time and time again. He is good forever, He is loving forever and so He cannot let what is not good and loving go on forever.
And indeed we get a hint of that in the passage itself. Come with me back to the words of King Artaxerxes in 4 verse 21. Now issue an order to these men to stop work so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order.
[40:00] Now did you notice the last few words of that verse? This city will not be rebuilt until I so order. In other words, this order may yet be reversed.

The city may yet be rebuilt. And guess what? By the time the first readers of Ezra were reading this book, they already knew that God was in the business of reversing things, didn't they?
Because these first readers had already seen the rebuilt temple. people. And here is a little teaser. Later on in Ezra chapter 7, this same king will write another letter.
And boy, is that letter totally different from this one. So wait for that. And is this not what we see in the gospel?
temple. In John 2, verse 19, Jesus tells the Pharisees who oppose him, destroy this temple and I'll raise it again in three days.
[41:13] And then verse 21 tells us that the temple he's speaking of is his body. And that's exactly right, wasn't it? His opponents tried to destroy his body, but even death could not beat Jesus in the end.

He died and he rose again just as he said. And that is the paradigm we bring whenever we encounter opposition to the gospel.
But today, when opposition comes, we can view it through a resurrection lens. We can say, I know things are discouraging now, but I know it's not the final word.
I know things are intimidating now, but I know it's not the final word. I know it sometimes feels like death, but death has to happen for there to be a resurrection.
And I can be sure of all this because Jesus has risen. And when we know that, we can say, along with Paul in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 8 and 9, we are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed.
[42:41] We can say along with him, 5, verse 7, we live by faith and not by sight. And we can say with him, 12, verse 10, that is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for when I am weak, then I am strong.

When opposition comes, we don't have to give up because Christ has risen. That is the lens we must put on today.
And so with that, I encourage you to do just that as we go to the Lord in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word.
Thank you for Ezra chapter 4, and in many ways, Lord, it doesn't seem like a very uplifting or encouraging chapter. And yet, Father, we know that this chapter comes as part of the larger story. where you reverse things. You show us that work against you cannot succeed, but rather you will make sure that your purposes will be done, that your kingdom will be built, that the gospel will go out and bring many more people to know you and to worship you.

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[44:10] So we hang on to that hope until that final day. Help us not to have our hands weakened, help us to keep being encouraged to build for the kingdom, to help each other to grow in Christ.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. go to do that dalla

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