

## Opposition to Restoration

### *Ezra 4*

As we are looking at Ezra this summer we are considering ways that God may want to do a work of restoration in our lives. Ezra is a book about restoration.

What has God been showing you about restoration in your life? And maybe it's not exactly restoration in your life, but rather a new thing that He wants to do. What does He want to do in your life? Do you sense that He wants to birth new hope within you? Does He want to renew your desire to pursue Him? Is it a consistent and deep devotional life? Is it purity? Is it a healthy marriage or a restored relationship? What do you sense God wants to do in your life?

As we think about these things that we sense God wants to do within us, we need to understand that getting there might not be easy. We should expect that there may be opposition to what God is doing in our lives. John 10:10 says:

<sup>10</sup> *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."*

We live in a spiritual world. We have an enemy who constantly opposes the work of God in our lives. He is a defeated foe for sure; but he is still a dangerous foe who wants to steal and kill and destroy the activity of God in our lives. We need to expect it. We need to prepare for it. There will be opposition.

As we have seen in the first few chapters of Ezra God is bringing about restoration for His people. He has brought them back to the land; they have rebuilt the altar and begun offering sacrifices and observing the festivals (3:2ff). And, as we saw last week, they laid the foundation of the temple (vv. 8-10), which was very significant because to move towards full restoration the temple must be built. The temple was the heart and the center of their worship of Yahweh. They would not experience full restoration until it was completed.

As we saw last week, when the foundation of the temple was laid there was a great celebration. It was so loud that it was heard "far away" (3:13). The people of the land certainly took notice that something was going on. And for many of them this was not a good thing and they began to oppose the restoration of God's people.

As we come to chapter 4 today, we are going to look at the opposition that the Jewish people faced as they continued to move towards restoration. As we look at this, we can hopefully develop some expectations about the kind of opposition we may face as we move towards our own restoration as well as how we can respond to it.

And so let's begin reading in 4:1:

<sup>1</sup> Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the Lord God of Israel, <sup>2</sup> they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

Up to this point everything has moved forward fairly unhindered in terms of their restoration. They had returned to the land. They had built an altar to God. They had begun to offer sacrifices. And they had laid the foundation of the temple.

But the narrative changes in verse one when we read that Judah and Benjamin had *enemies*. This is what the author calls these people from the vantage point of when he wrote many years after these events. History would prove that they were enemies, but for Zerubbabel and the other leaders it is possible that they did not yet know the true nature of these people. These were people who had been imported and settled in the land under the Assyrian reign of Esarhaddon. It is possible that they had adopted the local religion of the Jews, but they did not worship Yahweh alone. He was one of their many gods.

These people come to the leadership of the Jews with what looks like an honest offer to help. *Let us build with you. We seek your God.*

<sup>3</sup> But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us."

The offer of help is rejected. The reason given is essentially a political one. They say, "You don't have authority from Cyrus to help us build. It is us alone that Cyrus commanded to build." But more importantly it seems that they also rejected the help on religious grounds. They understood that their identity as the people of God could be in jeopardy if they comingled with these people from the lands who worshipped other gods. That had always gotten Israel in trouble.

And so the first expression of opposition comes as an offer of help. It looks so innocent, but the reality is that it was a subtle attempt to derail the Jew's restoration. These are enemies of God's people.

As you think about what God is seeking to do in your life, in your restoration, you need to be aware that **sometimes you will experience subtle opposition**. Subtle opposition is hard because it is not easily identified.

Maybe the new thing that you sense God doing in your life is to bring you to a place where you truly seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. You sense that God is calling you to be fully sold out to Him and to stop walking the fence in your faith. And

maybe you are processing this with a friend and that friend says, “You know, that’s great. I’m happy for you. But don’t go crazy. Is God really asking you to give this or that up to follow Him?” And what comes to you from a friend, who you know really does care for you may actually be opposed to the work that God is doing in you. But it is so subtle. Now, I’m not saying that such a person is the enemy; he’s not. That’s what makes his advice that is opposed to what God is doing in you so subtle.

When we think about subtle opposition, I think we need to **pray for wisdom**. James 1:5 tells us:

*<sup>5</sup> But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.*

We will need wisdom to discern and reject subtle opposition. The Jews had the wisdom to reject the help of the surrounding people. We should ask God for wisdom, which He promises that He will generously give when we ask.

Well, as we read on we are told that the opposition moved from something subtle to something a lot more aggressive.

*<sup>4</sup> Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, <sup>5</sup> and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.*

To *discourage* literally means, to “weaken the hands.” It’s the idea of causing them to lose strength for the work. They also *frightened* them. They created fear in them that disheartened them and caused them to stop building. And they *hired counselors against them*. Counselors were advisors who would speak and urge certain actions that would be wise. But in this case all of their advice was designed to frustrate the work.

The *people of the land* made a strong and persistent effort to frustrate the work of rebuilding the temple. It wasn’t a one-time thing. In fact verse 5 tells us that this opposition ran from the time of Cyrus until the reign of Darius.

And so initially the opposition was subtle. But when subtle didn’t work, they turned to more aggressive means. They discouraged and frightened and frustrated them. And so here’s the second principle: **Sometimes we will experience strong opposition** as we pursue restoration in an area of our lives or as we trust God to do a new thing in us.

Strong opposition may come in the form of a person who opposes what God is seeking to do in your life. Or it may be simply your tough circumstances or the deep ruts in your life of living independent of God. Or it may be the enemy who comes to you and whispers in your ear that you aren’t good enough; that you will fail; that God doesn’t care about you.

When you experience strong opposition like this, I would encourage you **to pray for strength and courage**. When God was doing a new thing in bringing Israel into the Land of Promise after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Israel faced strong opponents in the land. And so in Deuteronomy 31:6, Moses says to the people:

<sup>6</sup> *“Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.”*

If you are facing any kind of strong opposition, pray that God would give you strength and courage and the ability to trust that if it is something God is doing, He will not fail you or forsake you.

Now, as we come to verse 6, the writer of Ezra tells about several other instances of opposition. This section from verse 6-23 is a kind of parenthesis in his flow. He jumps forward in time to tell about another season of opposition that the Jews faced. Some people have thought that the writer of Ezra was just a bad historian and that he was mixed up about his chronology. But the reality is that he is writing to make a theological point. And in doing so he arranges his material thematically not chronologically. And so he says in verse 6:

<sup>6</sup> *Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.*

Some of your translations say, “Xerxes.” The different names for the same king essentially relates to one using the Hebrew version and the other a Greek version of his name. Ahasuerus is the king of Persia who followed Darius. He reigned from 486-464 BC. The temple was completed during the reign of Darius in 520 BC. And so what is recorded here is something that happened at least 34 years after the completion of the Temple. We aren’t told much other than the enemies of Judah *wrote an accusation* against them. This was a kind of formal complaint that was lodged against the Jews.

In verse 7 we read about more opposition:

<sup>7</sup> *And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic.*

Artaxerxes followed Ahasuerus. During his reign this group of local officials wrote another letter to the king in Persia about the Jews. We are to understand from the context that this too was some kind of accusation against the Jews.

Finally as we come to verse 8, the author spends most of his time telling us about one more letter written to King Artaxerxes. This letter was written on behalf of a whole host of officials and leaders in Judah who opposed the Jews.

In verse 11, we read this:

*Now <sup>11</sup> this is the copy of the letter which they sent to him: "To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River, and now <sup>12</sup> let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.*

The opposition here is not against rebuilding the temple; it is against rebuilding the walls of the city, which occurred a number of years after the temple was completed. The author adds this information here to make the point that the opposition against the Jew's restoration persisted.

As these enemies seek to persuade the king they do a pretty good job of spinning the facts. They call the city *rebellious* and *evil*. They go on:

*<sup>13</sup> "Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings.*

If there was something that would get the king's attention, it would be this. But this claim that the Jews could stand up to the power of the Persian king and refuse to pay *tribute, custom or toll* is really a bit absurd. They go on:

*<sup>14</sup> "Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king, <sup>15</sup> so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And you will discover in the record books and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past days; therefore that city was laid waste. <sup>16</sup> "We inform the king that if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River."*

We are told that the king does conduct a search into the records to find out the history of Jerusalem and he finds out that there were powerful kings who ruled in Jerusalem to whom tribute, custom and toll were paid. But you would have to go back nearly 200 years to a time when this was the case. Regardless, this is enough information for the king to issue a decree. Verse 21:

*<sup>21</sup> "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me. <sup>22</sup> "Beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?" <sup>23</sup> Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms.*

And so the people of the land got what they wanted. And from Nehemiah we know that they didn't just stop the work on the walls, they tore them down again. The strong opposition continued.

And then the author, having finished this parenthesis comes back to the current situation regarding the opposition to the temple and he writes:

*<sup>24</sup> Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.*

*Then* connects back to his statement about the opposition in verses 4 and 5. And we are told that the opposition didn't just hinder the work on the temple; it halted it all together. And for the next 17 years work on the temple ceased until the prophets Haggai and Zechariah showed up and called the people to return to the work. And as the author has shown in his lengthy parenthesis, the opposition to the Jew's restoration continued many years later when they sought to rebuild the wall.

And so at times the opposition was subtle. Much of the time it was strong. But either way, it persisted for many years, which leads to the third principle we see here: **Sometimes we will experience sustained opposition.**

Subtle opposition is difficult to discern. Strong opposition can cause discouragement and fear. But sustained opposition can just wear on you and cause you to want to give up. It can be so draining to keep slogging away over long periods of time in the face of it.

Some of you as you think about restoration and the thing that you believe that God really wants to do in your life, you are tempted to give up hope that it will ever come to fruition because of the sustained opposition that you have faced. In your mind you believe God wants to do this thing because it is clearly biblical. But in your heart as you've continued to face opposition, you are losing hope.

Maybe the restoration that you've been looking for God to do in your life is to help you really walk in purity. Do you remember the example that Steve shared last week from one man here at Faith? In part, he said this:

I foolishly thought the struggles I had with my lustful thought-life would fade away as I got older. So here I am four decades later with some of the same struggles with my thought-life and the temptations that follow.

For four decades he has struggled in this area. You have maybe faced the same kind of experience in a different area. Maybe it is with depression or a struggling marriage or a ruptured relationship with a child or a parent or a sibling or any number of other things.

When it comes to facing sustained opposition, I would encourage you to **pray for endurance**. The author of Hebrews wrote this to a group of believers who were facing sustained opposition in Hebrews 12:

*<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Endurance is what he said they needed to run the race set before them. And to have endurance he encouraged them to fix their eyes on Jesus and to consider Him who endured. He said they should do this so that they would not *grow weary and lose heart*. Pray for endurance. Look to the example of Jesus. Do not lose heart and grow weary when you face sustained opposition.

As you are trusting God for restoration; when you are trusting Him to accomplish anything in your life you should expect that at times you will face opposition. Sometimes it will be subtle; sometimes it will be strong; sometimes it will be sustained. However it comes and for however long it comes, pressing on to restoration will not be about gutting it out. It will be about faith and trust and looking to the One who will give you everything you need.

As we transition to a time of worship, I want to give you some moments to talk to God about your restoration and the opposition you may be facing. What is it you need? Wisdom? Ask Him. Strength and courage? Ask Him. Endurance? Ask Him.