

Ezra Ch4v1-24 - When The World Hates You!

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[0:00] Thanks. Thank you.

And on that, if you haven't yet received a copy, this little summary of what Ezra and Nehemiah, the book next to it, they go as a pair.

You can pick up your copy at the table this morning. It's on page 475, I think. Is that right?

Yeah, 475. So let's hear God's word.

So Ezra chapter 4, starting at verse 1.

[2:17] And then just go to the very end of the chapter, verse 24.

Thus the work of the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

We're going to have a second reading, and that comes in Philippians chapter 1, which is on page 1178.

Philippians chapter 1, verse 27.

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

[4:08] Then whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in the one spirit, and that you are in the one spirit.

Without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, and that you will be saved, and that by God.

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him. Since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Well, we can go back to Ezra chapter 4, which is on page 475. So let's pray together.

Our Father God, we thank you so much for your truth. And we pray that your word, written so many centuries ago, would speak to us afresh.

[5:37] Because you are the living God, and it is your living word that changes lives. We pray that it will form us and shape us to be the kind of people you have called us to be.

So that we may be ready to live life in this world for your glory and for our good. Amen. Well, we had just moved to Carigaline.

We had only been here a few months. And I was really keen to get to know people in the area. And a flyer came through the door, looking for people to join the Residents Association.

Perfect opportunity, I thought. So I rang the number, and I was invited to go to the house of the chairperson. And we would meet and have a chat.

So off I went a week later. I knocked on the door, and there was a wonderful welcome. He and his wife were very friendly. Tea and biscuits, and we had a great chat.

[6:47] Then all of a sudden, the atmosphere changed. You'll have to stop those Bible studies in your house. I was embarrassed.

I was taken aback. I gently pushed back, but was informed that there were too many cars around the place, and it wasn't the place to conduct church activities.

And to that, I soon left. What began as a very warm and friendly welcome suddenly turned to opposition.

I came home upset. I was unsettled, wondering what on earth was going to happen. Well, if you are a Christian here today, the reality is you will face opposition.

Life in the world is filled with hostility. That was certainly the case for God's people back in Ezra's day.

[7:53] Look at verse 1, chapter 4. When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, you see, plans had been drawn up.

Foundations had been laid. Building had begun. But objections arose. Not everybody in town was happy that the temple was being rebuilt.

We don't want no God folk around here. You see, this may come as a surprise to us this morning, but it's normal Christian living.

Jesus put it bluntly in John, chapter 15. You can turn to there. Keep a finger in Ezra, chapter 4.

And go to John's gospel on page 108. 103. 1-0-8-3. John, chapter 15.

[8:57] John, chapter 15. John, chapter 15. John, chapter 15.

So this is Jesus' words to his disciples. John 15, verse 18. If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

If you belong to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world.

That is why the world hates you. Go back to Ezra, chapter 4. Strong words from Jesus.

Now, I'm not saying that on your way home you're going to get rocks thrown at your car, or that you'll find a protest outside your house. But if you lived in parts of India or Kashmir, or as this little book from Church and Chains tells us about Iran, you can pick up a copy on the table.

[10:18] If you live in these places, that is the sort of thing that will happen. You see, what God is saying to us and to his church is, opposition will come in one way or another.

So two things we're going to look at this morning. The church will endure opposition, but the church will overcome the opposition.

The church will endure opposition, but the church will overcome the opposition. So first, the church will endure opposition.

In Ezra, chapter 4, there are at least three ways we can expect opposition to come. First, it will be subtle.

When the locals heard that the temple was being built, they wanted in on the action. So look at verse 2. They came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, Let us help you build, because like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him too.

[11:40] Seems pretty helpful and friendly, doesn't it? Perhaps these neighbours around abouts aren't so bad after all. Isn't it great that they want to help out with the temple?

And who knows, they might even join in with the worship. Praise the Lord for such great people. Well, not so fast. The author won't allow us to baptise them and welcome them into membership just yet.

He dropped a massive hint for us in verse 1. He calls them enemies of Judah and Benjamin.

Enemies of God. You see, there is an appearance of godly goodness. We might call them seekers. Do you see it there in the middle of verse 2?

We seek your God. It's so very subtle. They're not carrying placards or forming a protest. They say they want to be part of God's community.

[12:46] But pull back the layers and you discover their true heart. They are, verse 1, enemies. You see, history records for us what they were like.

No need to turn to it. But in 2 Kings chapter 17, you can read it when you get home, gives a complete record of what these people were like. And it can be summed up in one verse from 2 Kings.

They worshipped the Lord, but they also served their own gods. You see, they were breaking the very first commandment.

You shall have no other gods before me. Because God demands exclusive loyalty and devotion from his people. It's not the worship of God plus my own idols.

It's love God and worship God full stop. You see, it's so very subtle. I mean, wouldn't church growth be so much easier if we could say, come and join us.

[14:00] Worship God and worship anything else that you like. I mean, it would be just so easy to fill a hall like this. Come and join us.

Worship God and worship anything else that you like. But no, verse 3. Sir Rubbabel, Joshua, and the rest of the heads of the family of Israel answered, You have no part with us in building the temple to our God.

We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel. You see, opposition will come. And sometimes it's very subtle.

Second, it will be sustained. Sir Rubbabel's response didn't mean the opposition stopped.

In fact, it continued on and on and on for decades. Look at verse 4. Then the peoples around them, showing their true colors, set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.

[15 : 17] They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans. Discouragement. Fears. Frustration.

It's a lethal combination. You put in so much effort into Carigalline Baptist Church. But what's the point? I mean, it's not exactly the most popular place to be on a Sunday morning.

People won't like it if you keep on with that God talk. Just keep quiet. Or you may find you lose your friends or your job.

Are you still meeting in that community center? Forty years. You still haven't got your own building? Now maybe we could cope with comments like that if they were every so often.

But discouragement and frustration don't take holidays. Opposition is sustained. Notice the mention of the kings.

[16 : 27] The opposition continued. Look at the end of verse 5. During the entire reign of Cyrus, king of Persia. All the way down to the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

Now if you were to look up the history records, that's about 20 years. 20 years of opposition. And if you think that's a long time, look at verse 6.

At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem. And more than that, verse 7.

In the days of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithridus, Tabeel, and the rest of his associates, wrote a letter to Artaxerxes.

Which was a letter of opposition we'll see in just a moment. Now the time between Darius and Xerxes, again if you look up the history records, is about 30 years.

[17 : 32] And the time between Xerxes and Artaxerxes was about 60 years. So if you do all the sums between these four kings, we have a sustained opposition for over 100 years.

In other words, opposition to the people of God and the work of God never ever stops. We have an enemy, Satan and his minions.

And he will use every tactic possible to halt and disrupt the work of God and the building of his church.

Alex referenced it earlier, that he heard of stories within the Christian Union where they were facing some opposition. There are CUs in the UK who have been refused the opportunity to set up a Christian Union.

If it happened there, why can it not happen here? Maybe you're going through a trial or a time of suffering. And there's that whisper in your mind.

[18 : 44] What's the point of being a Christian? It only brings trouble. Year after year. Decade after decade. Generation after generation.

It's constant. It never ends. Opposition keeps coming. It's not only subtle. It's sustained.

But third, it will also be sinister. Ezra, the author, begins chapter 4 talking about opposition to the rebuilding of the temple.

But now he inserts a thing about the building of the city. He jumps forward in time but brings it to us now. And he talks about the opposition to the rebuilding of the temple.

Local authorities are taking God's people to court. Have a look again at verse 7. And in the days of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithridus, Tabeel and the rest of his associates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes.

[20 : 00] But what was in the letter? Well, have a look at verse 11. To king Artaxerxes. From your servants the men of Trans-Euphrates.

The king should know that the people who come to you, who have come up from us from you, have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city.

They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations. Verse 16. We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates.

Wow. It all sounds so very sincere. Oh, king Artaxerxes, we would hate for anything bad to happen to you or your kingdom. Even though he has them oppressed in another land, not their own.

You're such a good king. Well, the truth be known, they are stroking the king's ego to get what they want. Look how the king responded in verse 21.

[21:08] Now issue an order to these men to stop work so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order.

Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow to the detriment of the royal interests? As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Raham and Shimshai, the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop.

You see, sometimes opposition is blatantly sinister. They just want to see the work of God stop. And we need to take this seriously. Sometimes there will be appeals made to governments and to courts to ensure that God's people have no more influence in society.

It's already happened to some degree in some parts of the island. And it's happening in many places in the world today. The appeal to a higher authority to act so that the work of God and his kingdom would stop.

[22:32] If it happens in other places, it will happen here. Opposition will be sinister. So having jumped ahead in time, the author now brings us back to present day and refocuses our attention on the rebuilding of the temple.

Opposition seems to have got the desired effect. Look at verse 24. 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. It seems the opposition has won. And isn't that how we can so often feel? What's the point? I mean, no one's interested.

You're wasting your time. Book clubs, Bible stories, they don't work. Keep with the times. Get with it. The Bible is outdated.

Church is irrelevant. Christianity is over. Let's just pack our bags and go home. But not so fast.

[23:46] Because, second, the church will overcome the opposition. Look again at verse 24 with me.

Because there is hope in this verse. Look how it starts. The work of the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

It's a comment from the author reminding us that a king is coming called Darius who will ensure that the temple of God is going to be built.

And in case we don't believe it, just look at chapter 6, verse 15 over the page. Chapter 6, verse 15. The temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

You see, the opposition will come, but God's work continues. It's easy for us to become discouraged, fearful, frustrated.

[25:03] But don't we have a better king and a greater promise? You see, if God could work through a pagan king like Darius to see the temple rebuilt, how much more can we expect God to work through his son, the promised king called Jesus?

Remember what King Jesus said. I will build my church, and the gates of Hades or the gates of hell will not overcome it.

You see, opposition will come, but the church will overcome. You cannot defeat the church because the church is God's people.

Now, we might be in the business today of building temples with blocks and stone, but as a church, that image, we are like a temple.

Come with me, please, to 1 Peter. It's on page 1218. 1218.

[26:18] 1 Peter. 1 Peter. 1 Peter. 1 Peter. This is a letter written by the Apostle Peter to Christians who have been scattered all around the place because of their love for Jesus.

They've been kicked out of their homes, and they are living far from home. And he writes to encourage them in the midst of great opposition.

So, 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 4. As you come to him, as you come to Jesus, the living stone, rejected or opposed by humans, remember, he was crucified and put to death on a cross, but chosen by God and precious to him, you, the church, also like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house or a spiritual temple.

You see, Jesus is not building physical temples. He is building a spiritual temple. And as we come to Jesus, and as we place our trust in him, so we become part of the true temple of God, like stones being built together.

As we trust in the death of Jesus for our sins, his resurrection from the grave, so we are brought together to be a temple of God, his people.

[28:17] But it's going to be costly. Just as Jesus was rejected, so will his church. As we live for Jesus, as we tell others about Jesus, as we go about our workplace, as we share the gospel, opposition will come.

But, verse 6, for in scripture it says, see, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, that's Jesus, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.

Here's the encouragement of this verse, that those who trust in Jesus will never be put to shame. In other words, it will be hard, you will face difficulties and struggles, but we will overcome.

Opposition will end, and the church will last. So then, 1 Peter chapter 5, or chapter 4 verse 12, follow with me, chapter 4 verse 12.

He says to them, chapter 4 verse 12, Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

[29:48] You see, it's normal. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

He's saying to these scattered believers, opposition will come, but the church will overcome. Let's go back to Ezra chapter 4.

So how should we live in response to these things? Opposition will come, but the church will overcome. How do we live, and how do we encourage one another in these things?

First, three very simple applications to take away. First, protect the church. Did you notice in chapter 4 the role that the leaders played when opposition came?

Did you see it in verse 2? Remember, they came to Zerubbabel and said, let us help you build a temple. We worship God too. Include us. But, verse 3, Zerubbabel and the rest of the leaders said, you have no part with us in building the temple to our God.

[31:14] You see, the leaders led the people. They protected the people from those who subtly tried to join God's people.

You see, they didn't believe the same things and they needed protected. Now, while we all should be looking out for each other, the elders of the church have a special and primary responsibility for protecting the church.

And you are to hold them accountable to protect the unity of the church, to protect the purity of the church. You see, the church isn't a club for any belief and none.

No, the church are the special treasured people of God who Jesus died for and those who trust in Jesus and worship him alone are part of his people.

That's one of the reasons why we have a membership. It clarifies who are the true believers. It protects the unity of God's people and the purity of God's people.

[32:30] So first, protect the church and elders, this is your primary responsibility. Second, not only protect the church, but let's together pray for boldness.

Did you see in verse 4 and 5 the opposition? Discouragement and fear and frustration? Now how are we going to respond when those sorts of things come our way?

Well, here's how the disciples responded when people opposed them. You might remember this prayer in Acts 4. It's on the screen.

When the opposition came and the persecution was fierce, they prayed, Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea. You're in control of everything.

You rule everything. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. You see, opposition doesn't mean we stop and pack up bags and go home.

[33:41] It means we gather to pray. But notice what they pray for. They don't pray for the opposition to stop, but they pray that they would be enabled to speak the word with great courage.

courage and boldness. And if you were to read through Acts, we see how the word of God was spoken in opposition and the church began to grow.

We pray for courage to speak out the truth of the gospel. So come on Wednesdays. That's why we gather.

Yes, we will be learning to speak God's word to one another, but I'm sure as part of it, there will be times of prayer as we encourage one another to keep on with the work of God.

So protect the church, elders in particular, and as a church together, let's pray for boldness. And then lastly, remember the promise.

[34 : 47] Remember that in verse 24? The opposition meant the work on the house of God came to a standstill until the year of King Darius.

You see, if God can work through a pagan king, how much more can he work through his treasured and special people, the church?

People like us who are gathered here today. You see, the church belongs to Jesus. It's his church, and he has promised that the gates of hell will not overcome it.

And today, all over the world, the church is growing. We mentioned Iran, one of the fastest growing churches in the world today, in such great opposition.

people are coming to Jesus and trusting in him in our towns and on campuses and in our families.

[35 : 47] And you being here today is living proof that God keeps his people and that the church is growing.

Opposition will come to the church, but the church, because of Jesus, will overcome the opposition.

Let's pray. Amen. Our Father God, will you strengthen us and encourage us as your people together to stand strong in the face of opposition, that together we would run to Jesus, that he may fill us with courage and boldness to keep on proclaiming the good news, trusting your promises that you will build your church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.

We pray for our leaders, for our elders, for Ralph and Jonathan and Alex. Fill them with your spirit, that they may protect and guard and keep the church as they look to Jesus too.

Father, send us out with your blessing, with courage, and with assurance that you are with us.

[37 : 38] In Jesus' Amen.