

Renewal Breeds Resistance

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to begin in Ezra chapter 4 this morning. Ezra chapter 4. So that's about a third of the way through your Bibles in the Old Testament.

Ezra chapter 4. And what we're going to be talking about this morning is that renewal breeds resistance. Renewal breeds resistance. We've been talking about God's renewing work.

The kind of work that he does in individuals, in families, in the church especially, and through the church to his community. And so this leads us to the point where God's renewing work has begun among his people.

God's people are active in participating in his renewing work. But at this point, that renewal begins to encounter resistance. And so we're going to talk about a controversial subject today.

And that controversial subject is this. Conflict in a local church. Conflict in a local church. I'm sure you guys are excited to hear about this one, right? This is a tough one.

[1 : 04] This is a tough one. Because before looking at Ezra chapter 4, what I'd like us to do is just to take a couple moments. We need to think through some caveats to this. Because one of the challenges of talking about this is there are so many situations in which church conflict occurs.

If we truly are a family in the body of Christ, then like any family, we expect conflict to happen. Especially when there are spiritual forces, the devil and his angels, who want to undermine God's renewing work among his people.

Now the challenge is, I've only got so much time this morning. Church conflict is one of those things you can write entire books. You can write volumes of books about the right ways to respond to it.

Principles of response. How to handle every single situation as it comes up. You can hold week-long seminars. And you wouldn't get to the end of it. Because we're people. We're very complex. Situations get really complicated.

Really messy. Really fast. So really today, what we're hoping to do is just to cover some general principles of how to handle church conflict.

[2 : 07] There is so much more that needs to be said about this. We're not going to cover anywhere near all the things that need to be said. But this morning, we're going to look at what we can learn from Ezra chapter 4. About how renewal breeds resistance in a church and how we respond to that.

Now, when I'm talking about renewal breeding resistance, I think it's important to say, first of all, it doesn't...

Renewal itself doesn't create resistance. Renewal doesn't create resistance. But renewal always brings change. And change... And change is something that we have a lot of trouble with a lot of times.

We grow comfortable. We grow comfortable in the ways that we go about operating as a church. And sometimes, when change happens, there's resistance to that.

And I think it's helpful to imagine this resistance to renewal in this way. How many of you have done any sort of gardening over the last two or three years? How many of you have done gardening?

[3 : 10] Okay, show of hands. All right, so a fairly significant number of you. How many of you have ever done any gardening? Ever. Okay. Some. Some. All right, let's keep your hands up. If you've ever done gardening, ever, hands up in the air.

So that's, I would say, the majority of us here today. Okay, of those of you, how many of you have had to pull up weeds from your garden? I feel like even more hands went up all of a sudden.

That's the... Maybe you remember that part a lot more. Maybe you said, I didn't really do a lot of gardening. I just did a lot of pulling weeds. Right? How many of you were planning to grow those weeds? How many of you, you set out and you're like, I'm going to grow some weeds.

This is my goal as a gardener. Nobody plans that, right? You can take... Nobody plans it. Nobody wants weeds. You can take all sorts of preventative measures for weeds.

But it just seems like no matter what you do, weeds find a way to grow in your garden. Weeds are always growing in your garden. And a good gardener doesn't plant seeds saying, this time weeds won't grow.

[4 : 11] This time it'll be perfect. A good gardener recognizes, hey, weeds are going to grow. And a good gardener prepares to respond to that growth. And so it is with renewal.

Because when God's work of renewal begins, it's really a lot like a gardener spreading fresh soil on the ground. And this rich soil, it gives the nutrients for the garden to grow.

This rich soil brings new life, brings new growth. But weeds grow in it too. And you can go and you can buy that big old bag of soil.

And you can bring it home and you can spread it on the ground. When weeds grow, it's not because there were weeds, there were seeds in that soil. It's because there were seeds that were already in the ground waiting for an opportunity to grow.

And in this environment, weeds often can grow rapidly and they can choke out that new garden growth.

[5 : 08] If you don't respond to it. And in the same way, renewal also breeds resistance. Because there are going to be individuals and there are going to be groups, both inside the church and outside the church, who aren't interested in seeing God renew his people.

They aren't interested in seeing God renew his people. You know, maybe, first of all, maybe they just straight up are resistant to the Lord and to his work. Maybe they're conscious of that, particularly outside the church.

They don't want to see God's kingdom come to this earth. They want the world to continue as it is. And they don't want to see the church growing.

They don't want to see people coming to faith in Christ. But I think sometimes too, in the church, there is also resistance. Because we have in our minds certain ideas of what God's renewing work should look like. And typically, I've just encountered in a lot of churches, it looks like this.

We keep doing the same things and something different happens. That's sometimes the idea we have in mind for how God renews his people. Sometimes the renewing work of the Holy Spirit doesn't match our expectations.

[6 : 18] And so sometimes, our resistance to renewal, we might not even realize we're resisting it. So here's what we have to watch out for. We have to be on guard against this.

Because God's renewing work is undermined by opponents of worship. That's kind of the central idea we're exploring today. God's renewing work is undermined by opponents of worship.

So keep in mind, let's think about that term for a moment, of worship. By worship, we mean this. We're talking about individuals. We're talking about churches who are centered on God, who are centered on his mission.

And this mission of God, it encompasses and consumes their whole being. They love the Lord. Their lives are centered on the Lord. They are devoted 100% to the Lord.

And he is at the center of their world, not themselves and their own interests. They've abandoned those self-centered ways of life. They've chosen to trust. They've chosen to obey Jesus Christ as their Lord, as their King.

[7 : 18] And so we're going to see in a little bit what this opposition to worship looks like in real life. But first, we're going to look at Ezra chapter 4.

Ezra chapter 4 is going to guide us to seeing what this opposition looks like in real life. And I'm going to read it just a piece at a time here. And as we progress through this story, we're going to learn how God's renewing work is undermined by opponents of worship.

So the background of our story is this. It's that God's people, the remnants of the people of Israel, they have returned from 70 years of exile in a faraway country, in the country of Babylon.

Now, before they were sent off into exile, they had, for hundreds of years, they'd been worshiping other gods in addition to the Lord. And the result of that, of devoting themselves to other gods in addition to the Lord, in other words, their worship was not focused on the Lord.

It was spread out across a variety of other gods and idols. As a result, they were disobeying God's commandments. As a result, they were rebelling against the Lord. And they were allowing great injustices to flourish among the people.

[8 : 26] So now, they were led off into exile as a result of this. The Lord allowed their enemies to lead them off into exile. And now God is bringing them back to their land.

And they have, in many ways, they've learned their lesson. In some ways, we're going to find out they haven't. But they have learned that you have to devote yourself to the Lord. And they're going to rebuild God's temple.

They're going to rebuild this place where God is present in a special way. This place where they can meet the Lord. Where they can worship Him there.

So in Ezra chapter 3, the Israelites have laid the foundation for this new temple. And now in chapter 4, they're ready to continue this work. So let me begin reading Ezra chapter 4, verse 1.

Ezra chapter 4, verse 1. 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.

[9 : 38] And we have been sacrificing to Him ever since the days of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, who brought us here. 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.

So what we're seeing in this passage is opposition coming from people groups who are not part of Israel. It's coming from the neighbors of the people of Israel, from people who are living around Jerusalem.

And you'll notice that these are people who say that they have been brought there by the king of Assyria. These are people who were moved into the land by the Assyrian Empire nearly 200 years earlier.

They'd been exiled from their countries and then moved over into the land of Israel. The king of Assyria did this to kind of wipe out their identity as a people, to disconnect them from the land so they couldn't pose a threat.

That was their policy. So this opposition to the building of the temple is external opposition. It's opposition coming from outside of this faith community.

[10 : 49] It's coming from outside God's people. But notice that they don't see it that way. The opponents of worship don't see it that way. They're trying to convince the Israelite leaders that they're on the same team.

We're on the same team. And so what their argument consists of is they're arguing for unity. They're arguing for inclusiveness. This is an argument that would really resonate in our day and age.

And the occasion for their resistance is exclusivity. If you're looking for the occasion of resistance to God's renewing work, one possible occasion for resistance is perceived exclusivity.

This idea that you in this church are being too exclusive. You're preventing people who also worship the same God as you from worshiping the Lord with you.

And like I said, in our corner of the world, this line of argument would make a lot of sense. I think people in Vancouver, most people in Vancouver and in Squamish, would resonate with the thinking that's presented here. They would say something like this, Well, why don't you let them build the temple with you?

[11 : 56] Notice some of the rhetoric. Verse 2. We worship your God as you do. In other words, we're worshiping the same God. We're worshiping the same God.

Why can't we worship God together? And then they say this. We have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria. So in other words, not only do we worship the same God, we have a long tradition of worshiping this God.

We go back 200 years. Who are you to say now all of a sudden that we don't belong? Who are you to say that now we can't be worshiping God along with you? That we can't partner together in this?

And then they throw in this comment that the king of Assyria brought us here. So in other words, we're your neighbors. We belong here just as much as you do. Who are you to say that we don't belong in the worship of the Lord God?

And all this rhetoric is designed to do one thing, to place them on equal footing with God's people, with the people of Israel. They're trying to argue that the Israelites don't have a corner on God.

[13 : 05] That their religious beliefs, their practices, they're just as legitimate as those of the Israelites. We're all the same. It's only proper. This temple should be an ecumenical project. It should be driven by unity.

It should be driven by inclusiveness. Now that sounds really good at first. It does sound really good. But, as is often the case, it's what they aren't mentioning that's the key.

It's what they're not mentioning that is the true, genuine problem that prevents this partnership from taking place. Because, yes, they do offer sacrifices to the Lord.

But he is not the only God they're offering sacrifices to. In 2 Kings chapter 17, their behavior is recorded at length, and it's summarized in verses 33-34.

In 2 Kings 17, it's written about these people living in the land. They feared the Lord, but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away.

[14:10] To this day, they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes, or the laws, or the rules, or the law, or the commandments that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel.

So, in other words, if we were to give them a label that makes sense to us today, it would be this. They are pluralists. They accepted, they affirmed that all of these gods are legitimate.

They're all gods. They're all good. Who are you to say that one is right and one is wrong? The Lord is just one of any number of gods. Another label you could give them is that they are syncretists.

They engage in what we call syncretism. What this is, is that that's when you mix the beliefs and the practices of various religions into sort of a melting pot.

Or you take what's, or you take the, for example, in the case of the gospel, you take the gospel and you mix it with some ideas from our culture, even though they oppose the gospel, even though they contradict it.

[15:10] You kind of mix them together in a melting pot that is a lot more palatable to our culture. It's called syncretism. And here what they're doing is they're taking the worship of the Lord and they're trying to mix it in with the worship of other gods.

And they're doing this to hedge their bets. Their idea is if we can keep all of these gods in our favor, if we offer sacrifices to all of them, then at least one of them is going to show kindness to us and get our crops to grow and going to really establish us and show us favor.

But what they're doing is they're ignoring the commandment of the Lord in 2 Kings chapter 17, where in verse 35 he says, you shall not fear other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them, but you shall fear the Lord.

You shall not fear other gods. You shall fear the Lord. And so because of this, here is how the leaders of Israel respond in Ezra chapter 4, verse 3.

You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God. Kind of a slap in the face there. What they're saying is on a fundamental level, we don't have anything in common.

[16:28] There's a level in which we don't have anything in common when it comes to this partnership. They're recognizing, deep down, the worship of other gods.

These other religious beliefs and practices, they are not compatible. They are completely at odds with the right and true worship of the one true God.

And they continue in verse 3. We alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel. With emphasis on the God of Israel.

In other words, we will build alone because the Lord is the God of Israel. He is the God of Israel. And he is not identifying himself with you. Now that's a bold statement.

Because the Lord does welcome all nations to worship him. We encounter that in the Psalms. We even encounter that a couple chapters later in Ezra where outsiders are invited to participate in the worship of the Lord.

[17:27] But people can't come to the Lord on their own terms. I think that's a huge problem in our culture is we think that the worship of the Lord will take place on our own terms.

That anyone can come to God in the way that you see fit. But that's not the case. The Lord welcomes all nations to worship him but only on his terms.

Not theirs. These people in the land, they're trying to worship the Lord on their own terms as one of any number of gods. And they're just offering sacrifices. But they're not obeying God's commandments. They're not worshiping him the way that he says he should be worshipped.

They're not centering their lives on him. God is not willing to be accepted as one God among a pantheon of gods.

any more than you are willing to be accepted as one husband or as one wife among many that belong to your spouse. God refuses to identify himself with these false worshippers.

[18 : 29] And so it is today. Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, the one whom our culture claims to respect, because frankly, I don't think they pay attention to the things he actually said. because he refuses to accept any other competitors, any other way to God.

John chapter 14, verses 6 and 7, Jesus says, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. In other words, there is no other way to God. There is no other way to God the Father except through faith in Jesus Christ.

If anyone tries to come to God through any other way, whether it's simply just trying to go straight to God without any mediator, or whether it's trying to come to God on the basis of the good works you're doing, or on the basis of your incredible spirituality, there is no other way.

Jesus is saying anyone who tries to do that doesn't know God at all, doesn't know the Father at all. And God doesn't identify with such a person. God doesn't identify with them as his people.

[19 : 46] So, there are ways. There are ways on certain levels that you can partner with those who aren't identified as the people of God.

I mean, we saw in Ezra chapter 3, Israelites were partnering with men from Sidon and Tyre to get building supplies. Those were not followers of the Lord. But they can't worship together.

They can't build the temple together alongside one another. And that means that unity among churches and unity among Christian organizations, it has to be unity on the basis of Jesus Christ as the one and only exclusive Lord and Savior.

The more we have in common with other churches and organizations, the closer our partnership can be. But when God renews his people, sometimes that requires us to be exclusive, even if it's not popular, even if it seems like the wrong thing to do in the value system of our culture.

Sometimes we'll need to be exclusive, and our exclusivity is going to be the occasion for resistance. Here's how the resistance takes place.

[20 : 59] Ezra chapter 4, verse 4. Then the people of the land, and here's where they show their true colors, they 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.

And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. So renewal breeds resistance.

And here we're seeing the means of resistance. Here's what we're seeing, how resistance actually takes place in real life. And the means of resistance is this, politics. It's politics.

I know, that's a dirty word, right? Believe it or not, it happens. It happens in the church. It happens between, it happens when people try to resist the work that God is doing in the church.

It's intimidation and subversion that we see happening here. And to illustrate his point further, now the author includes a story, and he starts in verse 7.

[22 : 05] He actually kind of shifts us into the future. A story later in Israel's history. And you can see from this story that this is the time when the Israelites want to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Verses 7 through 23 are kind of like a shift forward in history. Because what they're trying to do is illustrate what this resistance looks like. He's illustrating the means of resistance.

So we begin in verse 7. In the days of Artaxerxes, so this is a few kings later, a few Persian kings farther down the line from Darius.

In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithridath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes, king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows.

Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province beyond the river.

[23 : 17] That's quite a list of names there. Apparently they've been making a lot of enemies, I guess. So what we're seeing here, in addition to the intimidation and the subversion we saw earlier in Israel's history, we're seeing here, as we move forward in time, we're seeing accusation.

Intimidation, subversion, accusation. And we'll get to the content of that accusation in just a moment, but I think what we need to do is stop here for a moment and consider carefully what this looks like, what this looks like in real life, because these are tried and true political tactics.

They've obviously existed for thousands of years. They're occurring 2,600 years ago. And frankly, they really haven't changed all that much in the last 2,600 years. We still use these tactics today.

Not only in our national and local politics, but even in our relationships with other people. Even among your colleagues at work, you probably see this sort of thing taking place as well.

And unfortunately, it infiltrates into the church. Here, the motives of these opponents of worship are exposed.

[24 : 27] Because before, they're using this language, this welcoming, this inclusive language. We want to be partners with you. And the Israelites don't buy it. The Israelites won't go for it.

So that didn't work, so now they're going to start attacking. And that's because they are in this, they aren't really motivated by this kind of warm, fuzzy, peace on earth.

Mindset. They're not motivated by that. They want control. It was just a ruse to gain control. They wanted to make sure that God's people didn't get out of hand.

They wanted a voice at the table, and they wanted to eventually wrest control from the people of God. This desire for control, I think it can properly be labeled anti-worship.

A desire for personal control to kind of take control, use politics, wrestle control for yourself is an act of anti-worship. It's an attitude in which I am living at the center of my world.

[25 : 34] I'm trying to gain control and power and try to run things myself. I'm trying to establish power, establish my own righteousness and goodness, rather than glorifying God and recognizing He is the only one who is righteous.

He is the only one with power and control. He is the only one who should be at the center. And rather than confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, so often we try to set up ourselves as Lord in His place.

It's anti-worship. And I think this is what broadens our discussion from simply conflict with people and groups outside of the church. This broadens our discussion to conflict even within the walls of the church.

Because this same attitude is present really just as often, if not more often, when resistance to renewal happens within the local church. And just like external conflict, the means of resistance is politics.

And I'm sure we, I doubt any one of us has seen all of these things taking place, but I'm sure you've seen some of them. Intimidation. It can look like veiled threats.

[26 : 44] I'm going to withhold my offering money if such and such doesn't happen. I'm going to leave the church if you don't do this. It could be passive-aggressive behavior.

That's sometimes a form of intimidation. You know, I want the attention, for example, of the church leadership. I want them to pay attention to my complaints and meet and talk. And then when they ask to, I've encountered this, when you say, okay, let's sit down and meet, you get the brush off.

Sometimes that happens too. Complain about the lack of community and then withdraw from the activities of the church, the very thing that could give you that community you've been looking for.

Politics shows up in subversion. It shows up in secret conversations when churchgoers complain to one another about an issue instead of going to the person who's responsible for this issue and talking with them about it directly.

It's a lot easier to do that, isn't it? To kind of talk about something rather than talking to the person responsible. I say that simply because I know. I know how much easier it is to simply complain to others about a problem that I see.

[27 : 53] it is way, way harder to actually go to the person responsible and to bring it up. It's awkward. It's difficult. There's potential for real major conflict.

And so sometimes we resort to politics. Sometimes subversion happens when churchgoers use political maneuvers such as going around others to build up this party of discontent.

And it shows up in accusation. When we gossip with one another. When we speak secret words about another person and we're not doing it to help that person or to build up that person.

Often this gossip morphs into exaggeration sometimes even outright slander. Who among us is not guilty of one of these things?

I am guilty. Both in positions of church leadership and outside of positions of church leadership I have done some of these things myself.

[28 : 58] And I do them because they're easy. And I do them because I want control. And I want things my way. And I don't have God at the center.

The thing about politics, these political maneuvers, is it's a natural expression of our sinful desires. And we're quick. Aren't we quick to criticize politicians politicians for doing all the same things that we do ourselves?

There's something, some truth to that statement that people get the government they deserve. We are so quick to criticize them for behaving the same ways that we ourselves behave on a much smaller scale.

And it undermines God's work of renewal. Because not only does it discourage the leadership of the church, not only does it tear down the activities that accompany renewal, but what you're doing is you're relying on human cunning and human tactics to transform a church rather than relying on God's spirit to do the renewing work.

Can you trust God's spirit to work to renew and change his people? Brothers and sisters, God, what is so great is that for these sins of ours, God has forgiven us.

[30 : 13] He's forgiven us all these sins because Jesus Christ, our Lord, he paid the penalty for us. He was punished for our political tactics, for our political maneuvering. And so we've been reconciled with God.

We've been reconciled with God and forgiven. And just as we have been forgiven by God, so we've been called to this new way of life, this new way of life, the way of forgiveness, the way of reconciliation, in which we renounce these tactics, in which we are quick to show mercy, in which our inclination is to reconcile with one another.

Our inclination is to resolve conflict. In Ephesians chapter 4, the apostle Paul writes about this. Ephesians 4, beginning in verse 29, he says, let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[31 : 44] That's our new way of life. That's our way of life as citizens in God's kingdom. That's our way of life as members of God's family, to walk in love.

To talk in such a way that we are building up in a way that fits the occasion so that those who hear us may experience the kindness and the grace of God.

That those who we are talking about may also experience the kindness and grace of God through our words. What that means is that if you feel like someone in church has treated you wrongly, or is behaving wrongly, the first person you go to is not typically, it shouldn't be the elders.

You don't run off and say, hey, can you go and correct, can you go and fix this person? The first person you go to is that person. The first person you go to if you see wrongdoing happening is the person doing wrong.

You come along and say, brother, sister, I've noticed this about you, and I want to help you. Do you see how this undermines the renewing work that God is doing in his church?

[32 : 53] How can I help you change? It's really only if they don't confess that they were wrong and ask forgiveness that you start bringing in other people to the picture.

As Christians, we're called to have straightforward, we're called to have direct, honest conversations with one another, as difficult as they are. So that political maneuvering doesn't take place.

Political maneuvering is what grieves the Holy Spirit of God. it undermines his renewing work in God's family. And this is very important.

This is so critical if we want to bring the message of God's renewing work to a world that desperately needs it. Because it's this dysfunction that happens in the church.

It's this unresolved conflict that lies underneath the surface that we sweep under the rug and don't deal with. It leads to this argument for resistance. God's renewing work is undermined by opponents of worship and their argument for resistance so often is this, hypocrisy.

[34 : 05] How many of you know a friend or a family member or a co-worker who says, you know what, I want nothing to do with the church because it's full of hypocrites.

I know several. Their argument for resistance is hypocrisy. And that's what we see in Ezra chapter 4. It's this historical behavior, the behavior of the Israelites in the past that their opponents identify.

Beginning in verse 11. This is a copy of the letter that they sent. 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. Now, because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor.

[35 : 16] Therefore, we send and inform the king in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old.

That was why this city was laid waste. We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province beyond the river.

So, I just love that buttering up of themselves. It is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor. You know, like, oh man, they just care so much for the king's glory and honor.

You know, all that is just kind of royal language to flatter the king. What they're really getting at is this. Jerusalem is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces.

Now, that's probably not really fair to the people who are there now. I mean, there's just not many of them. They're just a small group of people. They're just trying to cobble together the walls of Jerusalem.

[36 : 20] They pose no real threat to the king. But the argument for resistance is actually historically correct. When Babylon became a powerful empire, this kingdom of Judah, it became a vassal state underneath the Babylonians.

It became a vassal state that rebelled not just once, but twice. They rebelled twice against their rulers. And it's that second rebellion that led the Babylonians to march to Jerusalem, flatten the city, burn it to the ground, and lead the people into exile.

And now these people have the audacity to rebuild the city's walls after claiming the ruler's authority to rebuild the temple.

If you look at their history, you'd think this is just an act. This is a people who offer lip service to their rulers, who say one thing and do another, who are just ready to rebel against the kingdom of Persia.

So opponents of worship will often identify this hypocrisy, saying one thing and doing another, as a reason why God's work of renewal in the church should be resisted.

[37 : 39] That's the argument for resistance. There's hypocrisy in the church. Whether it's church leaders or whether it's church members, there really are many true stories of Christians behaving badly, of Christians being rebellious, of Christians being conflict-happy, not resolving conflict, but embracing and diving deep into it or avoiding it and pretending it's not happening.

And it's no surprise that this really is one of the most frequently given reasons why people abandon the church and in so doing abandon the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ.

I have several people close to me who use this argument for resistance and in so doing they oppose God's renewing work among his people.

The reality is that we need to be on our guard against hypocrisy. I think the only real argument we have against hypocrisy is to repent of it, is to change.

Remember what the Apostle Paul said about our new way of life in God's family in Ephesians 5. Be imitators of God as beloved children and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God, an act of worship.

[39 : 06] And because of what Jesus Christ has done for you, what he has done for me, we are now a part of God's family. And so what we do is because we are part of God's family, we adopt the love, the forgiveness of our Father.

We worship God and offer ourselves and sacrifice ourselves just like our older brother, Jesus Christ. We live a life that's characterized by love, by making every effort to help one another become like Jesus Christ.

And what this means is that when it comes to conflict, on the one hand, we don't let our anger explode. We don't use our words as weapons to accomplish our will, our own purposes.

And then on the other hand, we don't bottle up our anger and hide it and let it turn into bitterness, not even a low-level bitterness and resentment. We don't stir up conflict and we don't bury conflict.

Instead, we resolve it. When disagreements occur and when we get hurt, we address the problem. And the attitude that we address it in is one of mercy.

[40 : 16] We show mercy to one another. We're trying to address our sin, be reconciled to one another. That is the only way to short-circuit this argument for resistance.

And this is vital because what we see at the end of this chapter is that the result of resistance is severe. God's renewing work is undermined by opponents of worship.

And if you and I don't respond to their resistance in the power of the Spirit of God, the result will be breakdown. And that's the sad result at the end of Ezra chapter 4, beginning in verse 17.

The king, that's the king of Persia, sent an answer. To Rahum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province beyond the river.

Greeting. And now, the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me, and I made a decree and a search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it.

[41 : 27] And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem who ruled over the whole province beyond the river, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. Therefore, make a decree that these men be made to cease and that this city be not rebuilt until a decree is made by me.

And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king? You can bet that they were more than willing to fulfill the king's order. Then when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.

Now we shift back to the present. Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia. If you and I fail to show, to address resistance to God's renewing work, opponents of worship will gain power and they will gain influence and the renewal will be interrupted.

We all have a part to play in this. We all have a part to play in reinforcing worship and reinforcing and encouraging the renewing of God's people and in responding to resistance by opponents of worship.

Brothers and sisters, it's not just human. It's not just human beings. It's not just human beings that are resisting worship. It's spiritual forces. Satan and his angels don't want to see the worship of God.

[43 : 03] They're far more intelligent, far more powerful, far more cunning than human beings. We need to respond boldly. We need to respond wisely. But our confidence is not in adopting the right tactics and the right methods.

If our confidence is in those things, then we're just trying to fight them with the same weapons they're fighting us. With political maneuvers, political power.

Our confidence is that the same God who began the work of renewal among us will finish the work that he began. We're going to see that over the next few weeks in Ezra chapter 5 and Ezra chapter 6.

The Lord restoring his people. The Lord getting the renewal started again. Even though renewal breeds resistance, our hope is in the power of God.

We trust the spirit of God to unite his church. We take action to resolve conflict. And we stand firm in the gospel that was given to us by Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[44 : 08] Let's turn to him in prayer.