

Facing Opposition

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Our text today is Ezra chapter 4. That starts on page 363 of the Pew Bible, I believe.

Go ahead and turn there with me. That's Ezra chapter 4. As we come to God's word together, let me pray for us.

Our Father, as we have just sung, why should we gain from his reward? Father, indeed, we cannot give an answer.

Lord, if it were simply our own works or our own merits that brought your favor and love upon us, Lord, we would still be waiting. But God, you loved us even when we were unlovely.

You cared for us and you set your mercy and your favor upon us even when we were far away. And you came out into the far country to rescue us and redeem us and to bring us home.

[1 : 14] And Father, you've given us your word. The word of the prophets and the apostles preserved for us down through the ages through your spirit. And you continue to speak to us and guide us and direct us because you're a good God and you're a loving father.

So as we come together before your word this morning, we ask God that you would speak and that we would listen. That you would direct and we would follow. That you would cast a vision before our eyes and our hearts would be set alive again by your glory and your fame.

We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Ezra chapter 4. Let me read this for us. 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 the father's houses and said to them, Let us build with you.

For we worship your God as you do. And we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, who brought us here. But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of the father's houses and 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.

Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribe counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus, king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

[2 : 54] And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithradath and Tabiel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes, king of Persia.

The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. Rahim the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes, the king, as follows. Rahim 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 Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province beyond the river.

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's not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, 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.

[4 : 36] 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.

The king sent an answer to Raham 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, 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.

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? Then when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Raham and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem, and by force and power made them cease.

[5 : 52] 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. When the work of God's kingdom is on the move, opposition will arise.

Sometimes it will be hard to spot at first, subtle, covert. Other times it will be blatant and obvious. But make no mistake, there will be opposition when the kingdom of God is advancing.

Think of an organ transplant. When a new heart transplant is received, doctors have to be constantly monitoring to see whether the body will do what? Whether it will accept or reject the new organ.

It's deeply ironic, isn't it? That a dying body will attack the new life being planted right into the middle of it.

And so doctors have to be vigilant to monitor and work against this opposition to the new organ. The kingdom of God is like that. When the word of God's grace gives rise to a whole new people in the midst of the old, when there's a new creation that comes to birth in the midst of the old, then all too often the old creation, the old system, the world, can often war against the very thing that has arrived as a beacon of new life and hope.

[7 : 30] That's what we actually see beginning here in Ezra chapter 4. In fact, from this point forward, all the way to the end of Ezra and Nehemiah, this book that we're studying this summer, there's going to be ongoing conflict and opposition.

The first five verses here in chapter 4 tell us about the opposition that arose for the first generation that returned from exile. Remember, in Ezra chapter 1, the return to the land from exile is presented as a new exodus.

And then in Ezra chapter 2, the people are numbered for their march back to the land, just like the book of Numbers in the Torah. And in Ezra chapter 3, that we looked at last week, they celebrate the festival of booze, worshipping God for his faithfulness.

But here, in Ezra chapter 4, opposition comes. And it happens directly after the foundation of the temple is laid, around 537 BC.

And so the advance of God's kingdom, this new exodus, this new creation, this renewed people is met almost right away with adversity, with opposition.

[8 : 46] Then something really interesting happens in this chapter. In verses 6 through 23, Ezra inserts into his narrative at this point, two more examples of opposition that arose over the course of the next 80 to 90 years into the future.

You know, if you wanted to, you could jump directly from verse 5 all the way down to verse 24 and just kind of pick up the story from there. But if we did that, we'd miss some of what Ezra wants us to see at this point.

He inserts this digression, as it were, to make a spiritual point. So in verse 6, he takes us to the reign of Ahasuerus, also known in history as Xerxes I, whose reign began in 486 BC, about 50 years after the events of verses 1 through 5.

Opposition arose then, he said. And then in verse 7, we jump ahead another 40 years after that to the middle of the reign of Artaxerxes, probably around 450 BC or so.

There, in that moment in time, the people had begun rebuilding, not the temple at that point, but the city walls, and opposition has arisen against them. And only then, after having drawn our attention to these further instances of opposition, does the narrative then return in verse 24, back to the days of that first generation who returned from exile.

[10 : 15] And there we're told that the work on the temple ceased until the second year of Darius, king of Persia, which was about 520 BC. In other words, for about 15 years, the work comes to a halt.

So Ezra 4 is like this panoramic view covering nearly 100 years of adversity that the people of God faced as God advanced his kingdom through them.

So what are we meant to learn from Ezra 4 today? First, the first thing we learned from Ezra 4 is that we have to remember to expect opposition as God's people in the world.

Many of us this weekend are completing a milestone in our education, graduating and launching out to whatever is next. For many of us, it's just another weekend.

That's it. But for all of us, we have to remember that the Christian life isn't going to be a smooth road. At the very beginning of his earthly ministry in the Sermon on the Mount that we read from earlier, Jesus reminds his followers that there's going to be persecution ahead.

[11 : 33] Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said. And then it's the only beatitude he sort of doubles down on and drills down on. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. And then at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, not just the beginning, but at the very end as Jesus is preparing his apostles for his departure, he tells them in John chapter 15 in his farewell discourse, Jesus says, And you know, these words of Jesus don't just apply to the first generation of apostles.

Because the apostles went on and taught the same thing to the churches. In Acts 14, Paul tells the churches that he has just planted, that it's through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God.

And in Peter's first epistle, the apostle Peter writes in chapter 4, Beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. And the apostle James in the first chapter of his letter says, Blessed is the one who remains steadfast under trial.

For when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life. And the apostle John in the last book of the New Testament writes a whole book about the church remaining steadfast under trial and opposition while God brings his sovereign purposes to pass.

[13 : 26] So every major voice in the New Testament, Jesus above all tells us to expect opposition as God's kingdom goes forward.

Now, of course, that doesn't mean we go looking for opposition, right? Think about Ezra chapter 4. The people weren't trying to pick a fight with the surrounding people when they showed up to rebuild the temple.

Just the opposite. God had sent them there to be a blessing to the nations. And it's the same with the church. Jesus says that we're meant to be salt and light.

Facing opposition because of our own foolishness or our own sinfulness isn't the same thing as facing opposition for the name of Christ. Jesus said, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, not blessed are those who are persecuted because they post snarky, insensitive social commentary on their Twitter account.

Right? So we aren't meant to go looking for opposition and stirring up trouble. However, I think we have to admit that our generation of Christianity, especially us young American Christians, we have to confess that we like being liked.

[14 : 48] We often view our missional effectiveness by how accepted we think we are by the culture. And again, if we are living in line with the truth of the gospel, there will be things that our cultural time and place will respect or admire in us.

Our devotion to mercy and justice, our compassion toward the weak and vulnerable, our care for the stewardship of God's creation. If we're living in line with the truth of the gospel, there are going to be things that are admirable culturally, but at the same time, in any culture, in any time, in any place, there are going to be things that deeply offend.

For example, our adherence to the utter uniqueness of Jesus in the gospel and the necessity of faith in Jesus for eternal life, the reality and eternality of God's judgment, the authority of Scripture for all of life, there are going to be things that go against the grain.

If we look at Ezra 4, we actually see that there are at least two kinds of opposition that we can expect. On the one hand, we can expect what we might call subtle opposition. This is in verses 1 through 5, if you take a look back there.

The people of the surrounding districts come to this construction project happening at the temple site, and they say, Hey, let us build with you. We worship your God just like you do. Now, some historical background here.

[16 : 29] In the 7th century BC, about 100 years prior to these events, the Assyrian Empire repopulated the conquered northern territories of Israel with people from other parts of their empire.

It was basically a way of just subjecting a whole region. Take one people, put them over here, put another people over there. They're all mixed up and confused. You can rule them very easily that way. It was pretty pragmatic.

And we see in 2 Kings chapter 17 that while some of the resettled people began worshiping Israel's God, they also still went right on worshiping their other gods as well. So the result wasn't really the worship of the Lord, but a kind of syncretistic religion, a mix of this and that, which at the end of the day was really an exchange of the true God for idols.

So when in Ezra chapter 4, the people of the land come and say, Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, that's not actually true. But you have to imagine how tempting it must have been for those returned Jewish exiles to want to accept the offer.

Think about it. These returned exiles were a small, beleaguered people. They were politically and economically vulnerable. They needed all the help they could get, right?

[17 : 50] Why not join forces and we'll build the temple faster? Done. We can overlook some of those differences. Not that big of a deal. But that's not how they respond.

The returned exiles stand firm against this subtle opposition, this temptation to compromise on the uniqueness of the Lord God. But note how the returned exiles do respond.

They don't simply say, You have nothing to do with us. Full stop. That wouldn't have been quite right had they just said that.

Because we are still called to love our neighbor, right? To serve and minister to them. There were lots of ways that the returned exiles had to work and cooperate and negotiate with the people of the land, politically, economically, socially.

This was the generation, after all, that God himself had told, while they were still in exile, to settle down and seek the good of the pagan city of Babylon, the very one that had carried them off in the first place.

[18 : 54] No. What the returned exiles here in Ezra chapter 4 tell the people of the land is, not just you have nothing to do with us, but you have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God.

When it comes to the spiritual work of worship, to the work of ministry God had given them to do, ultimately, when it came to proclaiming and upholding and glorifying the uniqueness of the God of Israel, that there's none like him, none compare, all other gods are simply false, empty idols compared to him.

When it came to that, they could not budge. I think we face the same sort of subtle opposition today.

It's easy to want to say that Christianity is just one good option among many. We're all seeking for truth, after all, and your truth is your truth, and mine is mine, and aren't all the spiritual options just as good as any other at the end of the day?

But friends, the good news about Jesus is not actually just one more option among many. The good news about Jesus isn't just one more metal dish above the steaming water of the buffet line that you just sort of pull out and push in like they do at Nika's every Sunday afternoon when I get lunch there.

[20 : 24] The gospel is something else altogether. Every religion, every worldview, every life philosophy is going to give you a set of standards to meet so that you can be blessed and accepted, I guarantee you.

But only Christianity says that God has stooped down, took your place, met the standards on your behalf, bore the crushing weight of your failure so you don't have to, and now offers you that acceptance and blessing wholly by grace as a gift.

And anyone can receive it if we admit that on our own we're lost and only in Christ we're found. You know, the people of the land in Ezra chapter 4, they actually could have joined the returned exiles had they forsaken their gods and truly accepted the Lord alone as God.

So we have to endure through this subtle opposition, not just for our own sake, but for our neighbor's sake. They have to see the uniqueness of Christ so that they can experience his unparalleled grace as well.

So Ezra 4 tells us to expect some subtle opposition, but it also tells us to expect just outright blatant opposition. We see this in the big sort of middle chunk of this chapter.

[21 : 57] In verses 7 through 16, the letter that's written against the returned exiles in the days of Artaxerxes is just full of outright slander and accusation. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city, verse 12 says.

The gloves have sort of come off now. It's no longer, hey, let us build with you. It's just like, nope, they're bad. Stop them. In other words, what they're saying is these Jews have a history of rebellion, oh king, and if you let them rebuild that city, they're not just going to stop paying their taxes and dishonor you as bad as that would be, but they're going to take all of the surrounding province with them as well and take the whole thing into rebellion.

You're going to have a situation on your hands. You know, this is often how the church is opposed. Christianity is presented as just plain bad for society, as a social ill.

You see that throughout the book of Acts. Do you remember that moment in the book of Acts when the apostles arrive in the city and they say, and you know, they go to the sort of authorities, to the magistrates, their opponents go to the magistrates and say, these are the people who are everywhere turning the world upside down.

And we often think of that as sort of like a compliment. Yeah, we're turning the world upside down. That's not how they meant it. They meant that these people are overturning the social order and creating a lot of bad news.

[23 : 30] This is really, really bad. All those people who are turning the world upside down, they're here and they're causing the same trouble and you've got to stop them. And you know, Luke writes the book of Acts in part to defend the church against this kind of slander.

In the fifth century, Augustine defended the church in his day against the same charge. People in his day were sort of asking, why did Rome fall to the barbarians?

And they looked around and a lot of the cultural elites said, you know what, I think it's the Christians' fault. They've ruined our society. They told us to stop worshiping the old Roman gods, so we stopped worshiping the old Roman gods and then we got defeated.

You do the math. The Christians are the bad guys. So Augustine, as only Augustine could do, writes a giant book that takes him decades to finish called The City of God and in a masterful way defends Christianity against these charges.

And you know, I think the same basic charge is still being made today. Christianity is portrayed as just plain bad for society.

[24 : 45] We see that today in a few ways, I think. On the one hand, Christianity is sometimes portrayed as sort of anti-reason or anti-science. It's portrayed as a belief system that just sticks its head in the ground when it comes to reason and science and progress.

You know, the funny thing is that that couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, one could argue that it's the biblical worldview better than any other that undergirds and actually makes sense of modern science.

I mean, think about it. That the world is a place of regularity and order and that we humans have rational minds that can perceive and understand that order and make sense of it.

all of that makes a whole lot of sense if there's a God who created the world and who created us in his image. It doesn't make as much sense if the world is just sort of a random chaotic accident of time and chance and energy and luck.

So the claim that Christianity is anti-science couldn't be farther from the truth, but you know, maybe more prevalent today is the idea that Christianity is anti-morality. In other words, Christians are portrayed at times as people who hate those who are different or who disagree with them.

[26 : 05] Christians are portrayed as closed-minded, even at times bigoted. Now look, I'm sure there are plenty of rotten people in the world who profess the name of Christ, but genuine Christianity, genuine faith in the gospel doesn't breed hatred for those who are different.

Just the opposite. You know, it's the biblical gospel after all that gave us the very idea not merely of loving our neighbor as ourself, but even loving our enemies.

In other words, even if I deeply disagree with you, I'm commanded to love you, to treat you with dignity and respect and kindness because that's how God treated me when I was his enemy.

That's what it means to follow Jesus. Not merely to approve of everything and everybody, but to treat even our enemies with dignity and respect. God bless you and let's see the kingdom advance in our midst, brothers and sisters.

Do you realize that there's going to be spiritual opposition? There's going to be social and cultural opposition. It's going to come. So let's not be caught off guard as if something strange is happening.

[27 : 29] Some of it's going to be subtle, some of it's going to be blatant, but let's not get angered or embittered. This is what Jesus himself said would be the case. It's expected.

But Ezra chapter 4 doesn't just teach us to expect opposition. The second thing it teaches us is that we have to remember how the story ends. As Ezra 4 sort of stacks these stories of opposition one on top of the other, it's a bit sort of disorienting at first, isn't it?

You sort of wonder where is this story going? But as he keeps sort of telling story after story and example after example, he keeps pushing us ahead, doesn't it?

It's sort of thrusting us into the future, forcing us to look ahead and to realize that, you know, we're not alone when we face opposition. This isn't the first time Ezra seems to be saying that opposition has arisen and it won't be the last time.

The church has faced it before and will face it again and each time the church has endured and will endure. Do you remember when Jesus said the very gates of hell in that arresting phrase?

[28 : 46] The very gates of hell won't prevail against the church. We have to look ahead to how the story is going to end. So how does the story of Ezra and Nehemiah end?

Well, they finish the temple and they finish the walls and a lot of our sermons in the coming weeks are going to be looking at how in the world they do that in the midst of all this opposition.

But how will our story end? And in order to see that we have to look to Jesus. In the face of Christ we see how God's story for us will be completed.

And ultimately we look to a Savior who faced opposition for us. Jesus faced the ultimate opposition. He was crucified, died, and was buried.

But three days later He rose again, ascended to the right hand of the Father, and will come again in perfect justice to judge the living and the dead. So what will keep us from being discouraged and afraid and frustrated when opposition comes?

[29 : 57] It's this. It's the certainty that no matter what the world throws at us, it can't ultimately destroy us. How do we know that?

Because friends, the only opposition that could really destroy us, the only opposition that could really undo us, God's wrath against our own sin, that opposition has been put to rest at the cross.

And if that holy opposition against our sin has been put to rest, what other opposition could possibly, truly harm us now? Do you see how the real sting has been removed from any worldly opposition that we face?

No matter how dark the clouds begin to roll, we know that whatever thunder and whatever storm they bring, they're not going to undo us because the righteous wrath of God's been satisfied and we're his children now, fully accepted in the beloved.

And any trial that comes and any opposition that comes in fact can only result in our sanctification. And God can only use it for the advance of his kingdom.

[31 : 21] So brothers and sisters, expect opposition, yes, but remember how the story ends and remember the confidence that you have in Jesus, that we have in Jesus, as his church. And may the Holy Spirit empower us to meet this opposition with endurance and wisdom and with grace and with peace.

Let's pray. Father, you know the hearts of everyone who's gathered here.

God, you know the ways in which we are discouraged. discouraged. You know the ways in which we are afraid. You know the ways in which our paths seem frustrated.

Just like the people who return from exile and face opposition, God, we too get discouraged and we get afraid and we feel frustrated at every turn.

But Father, thank you for the confidence that we have that this story we're a part of is ultimately in your hands and that if Christ is for us, who can be against us?

[32 : 35] Holy Spirit, cause that truth to come alive in us. Make it real and make it burn this week with a fervency and a fire that allows us to go out into this world that you have made and that you love and to be salt and light no matter what comes.

to respond every slander with kindness, to respond to every untruth with integrity, God, to respond to every wrong with forgiveness and with boldness and with courage.

And God, would your kingdom continue to advance in our city and in our day so that people could see how great you are, God, and how worthy you are of our whole lives and our whole praise.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.