

Ezra 4

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[0 : 00] This morning, as we were looking at verses in James chapter 1, we were discovering, or hopefully rediscovering, that obedience is the path to true freedom.

We read there of the perfect law that gives freedom. And not only true freedom, but also lasting blessedness or happiness. James speaks of how those who are not only those who listen to God's Word, but who do it, are blessed in all that they do.

So, obedience was very much commended to us. But is it easy to be obedient? Is it easy to do what God would have us do?

Is it plain sailing to live a life of obedience to God? And I think the answer is very clear. It's not easy for us. And it's difficult for us maybe at a number of levels.

And I'm going to mention three levels, and then we'll focus in on one because it relates to the chapter that we've read, Ezra chapter 4. One of the reasons why it's difficult for us to be obedient is that God is very demanding.

[1 : 17] And there's no getting around that. Our God is a demanding God. He has every right to be demanding. He's not overly demanding. He's not unreasonably demanding. But He is demanding.

His commands are demanding commands. We think of just one that is probably as demanding as you could imagine. Be perfect as I am perfect. It's not easy to live a life in the manner that God demands us to live.

So, that's one difficulty. Another difficulty is that we are very weak. We are very weak in so many ways. I'm not going to develop all the ways that we're weak. But I think we can identify with that reality.

But the third reason why it's difficult to live a life of obedient service to God is that, if I can put it this way, it's a jungle out there. Others stand in the way of those who seek to obey God and do His will. There are those who oppose God's people. There are those who oppose efforts that are made to do God's will and to do the work that God would have us do.

[2 : 23] And so, that is another level, if you wish, or layer of difficulty in this matter of being obedient to God. And it's the third of these difficulties that we'll be exploring briefly as we study or think about the fourth chapter of Ezra that we read.

Opposition to the work and people of God. Now, before we embark on this, we do need to try and get a bit of a historical handle on the material recorded in Ezra 4.

I kind of already have highlighted that it's a complicated chapter in terms of its historicity. Not so much in terms of its historicity. It's historical. But in terms of it not following a neat chronological timeline, which we would much prefer that it did.

But it doesn't. So, we're going to put up on the screen just some of the key dates. So, it's quite...

Can you read... Oh, there's a bigger screen up there, isn't it? I'm looking at a smaller screen.

Can you read what's up there? Oh, I'm seeing a few. A few aren't so sure. Well, if you're close to the TVs, you'll see them. But, well, let me just quickly go through this to give you an idea. I can't read that, so I'm going to use my bit of paper.

[3 : 30] So, first of all, you know, one or two key, key dates where this whole exile period begins. As I mentioned already in the story so far, 586, key date, fall of Jerusalem, conquered by the Babylonians, the beginning of the exile.

Now, 539, Cyrus of Persia defeats the Babylonians, and the following year issues this decree recorded for us in Ezra chapter 1 that allows the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

Again, we've mentioned this even today already. About 50,000 of the Jews return under Zerubbabel to Jerusalem. So, almost immediately, the temple rebuilding starts, and as quickly as it starts, it halts.

And that's what we learn about in chapter 3, where there was this attempt to begin, and moving on to chapter 4. The first verses of chapter 4 and then the final verse also relate how the work is brought to a halt by the opposition that there is.

530 through to 522, you have, well, 530, Cyrus dies, and he is succeeded by the next king of Persia, Cambyses.

[4 : 48] Not such a critical figure in terms of Ezra, but just to not leave him out. 522 to 486, you have the reign of Darius I. Now, he comes into the story in chapters 5 and 6, where he is sent a letter asking for help in terms of the construction of the temple, and he decrees that the temple, or the construction of the temple, recommence.

Now, last Sunday evening, when we were looking at Haggai 2, that's the point we were at. That recommencing of the work in the temple was largely thanks to Darius intervening in favor of the Jews.

So, 520, having had this decree issued by Darius, temple rebuilding restarts. And about five years later, the temple is completed. Now, after Darius passes away, moves on, dies, Xerxes takes over as king, emperor of Persia.

And he's the one who's mentioned in our chapter in verse 6. But you'll notice that that's, you know, the next century from the events that the first few chapters have been recording.

Xerxes also, just to kind of locate him in terms of the bigger story of the Bible, he is the king who was on the throne when the events of the book of Esther were taking place.

[6 : 13] Xerxes is replaced by Artaxerxes. He's well known in the biblical account because he comes up in Ezra. He authorizes Ezra's return to Jerusalem, which is subsequent to the events in the first few chapters.

He also is the king who, as a result of this letter that we've read, suspends the building of the city. And this is a long time later from the temple.

The temple's already been built. But the Jews have moved on. We've got the temple. We have our own houses. Now we want to rebuild the city. And there's this letter sent. And he says, oh, we can't have that. And he decrees that the building or the construction of the building be suspended.

And that's all in the chapter that we've read. But then, interestingly, there's a final twist. And we're going to be thinking about this twist in a moment. It's the same Artaxerxes who then authorizes Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls.

So, the very man who had decreed that the construction should stop just a year later gives Nehemiah authorization to return and to recommence that which he himself had ordered to be stopped.

[7 : 22] And we'll come back to that. But that hopefully gives you some kind of idea of where we're at. As I say, chapter 4 is a little bit complicated in terms of the events that it records covering, you know, well, over a century or more.

There's a couple of things I want to do this evening as we think about this chapter. First of all, just to mention in the light of this chapter one reality we have to be aware of and prepared for.

That is the inevitability of opposition to gospel work. But then we want to move on and think about the nature of it, some aspects of that opposition, and maybe particularly also consider how we are to respond to that opposition.

And we'll draw some of that from the chapter and some of it simply from a broader, I suppose, body of material, biblical truth that helps us in thinking about these matters.

First of all, let's just notice, and very fleetingly, the inevitability of opposition. Right at the beginning of chapter 4, what do we read? When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel.

[8 : 40] And then it continues what they attempted to do. You know, it was inevitable, really, that this would happen. Here the Jews had returned.

They're about to rebuild the temple. And immediately there is opposition to that rebuilding. And, of course, this opposition reveals a timeless reality that was true in the days of the events recorded here in this chapter, but remains true today.

And that is that the world is made up of those who are, by grace, friends of God and those who are enemies of God. The very first truth that is stated is that there are enemies when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard.

There are enemies of God and there are enemies of God's people. And enemies will act like enemies. They will oppose. And that is what we find happening here.

The Bible often speaks of opposition to the gospel and to the church as the norm. It is what we are to expect. There are exceptions when God, in His gracious providence, spares us, at least in significant measure, opposition.

[9 : 51] But those exceptions, historical exceptions, we might say, simply serve to prove the rule. You know, I've heard it said, I think even since I was a wee boy, I heard it said that God's work done in God's way will never lack God's resources.

I think that's true. But it's also true that God's work done in God's way will seldom lack the opposition of God's enemies. Indeed, from this point in Ezra right through to the end of Nehemiah, which really covers quite an extensive period of time, there is almost constant conflict and opposition.

In the midst of some encouragement, in the midst even of revival under Ezra, there is this one constant opposition to the work of God in one form or another, in greater or in lesser measure. Nothing that God's people attempt for God will go unchallenged. Perhaps we could reflect on why many of us experience relatively little in the way of opposition, if that is indeed true of many of us, as I suspect it is.

Is it because in God's providence we are being unusually spared and we can be grateful to God for that? Or is it because, and I pose the question, is it because we're doing so little of consequence that God's enemies can hardly see the point in opposing us?

[11 : 22] God's enemies get busy when they see that gospel work is being done and there's something to oppose. If nothing has been done, then there's nothing to oppose.

It stands to reason. So, the inevitability of opposition. But let's move on and think a little bit about the nature of and response to the opposition. I'm going to mention or identify five features of the opposition that can be found in this chapter.

So, that will relate to the first few verses, which relates to the very beginning when they're trying to start the construction of the temple and there's opposition. We'll also comment on those events that are much later on in history, when the opposition was not to the building of the temple, it had already been built, but to the rebuilding of the city itself.

So, we'll draw from both of these periods of history which are recorded in this one same chapter. So, five features and then our response to them.

What can we learn, be it from the chapter or from beyond the chapter? And there's one point in particular that I'm going to come to towards the end that, if you remember anything, I hope this will stay very much engraved on your mind and soul.

[12 : 36] And we'll come to it and I'll give it its due emphasis when we get there. But let's just mention these different features of opposition. The first kind of opposition that we find here in the chapter is what we might call, or what appears to be, friendly and polite opposition.

There in verse 1, these enemies, though they are described as enemies, they approach Zerubbabel. And what is it that they do or what is it that they say? Well, we see that in verse 2. Well, these seem very friendly people.

And if the writer hadn't flagged up for us that they were enemies, we would have no reason to think they were enemies. They appear to be friends. They want to help. Who are these very friendly opponents of the Jews?

Well, as they themselves identify who they are, they were folks who had been resettled by the Assyrians in the northern kingdom, Samaria.

So, we're talking, oh, a good hundred years or more before the events recorded here. So, the northern kingdom falls. Many of the Jews in the northern kingdom go into exile or are scattered.

[13 : 56] Some remain. But then what the Assyrians do is they repopulate the area with folks from other parts of their conquered territories. They arrived in the northern kingdom.

There's an element of intermarriage with some of the Jews who remained. And so, you have this mishmash, ethnically and religiously, there in what was the northern kingdom.

These are the people who are concerned about the return of the Jews and the building of the temple or the imminent building of the temple.

We don't have time to look at it now, but in 2 Kings 17, we find some very interesting insights into these people, who they were and their circumstances.

Indeed, when they were first populated there, they had all kinds of trouble. And the Assyrians, one of the things they did was they sent a priest, an Israelite priest, to help them worship as they were meant to worship.

[14:56] So, the thinking went. But what 2 Kings 17 makes very clear is that that never happened. They're spoken of as worshiping the Lord and offering sacrifices to Yahweh, but together with their pagan practices.

And that chapter concludes by saying that they never committed fully to the Lord and rather were drawn in the direction of paganism.

It's really the descendants of these people that are the Samaritans that we read of in the Gospels, that, you know, come up in different moments in the Gospel accounts.

So, these are the people who say that they want to help. But the writer helpfully makes sure that we know that they're no friends of the Jews. They're described as the enemies of Judah and Benjamin. They are people who are opposing the work, or at least trying to oppose the work, be it consciously or unconsciously, from the inside. They're thinking, if we can get in and be part of these folk, then from the inside we'll be able to do much more damage than coming head on and opposing them.

[16:05] How does the rubble respond to this seemingly kind offer of help? Well, with firm conviction. What does he say to them? You might almost say, it sounds harsh.

You have no part with us. But not only with firm conviction, also with astute wisdom. Because in case, you know, to maybe anticipate them coming back and say, well, why can't we help you? He then also says that we have to do this as King Sidus, the king of Persia, commanded us. So, it's almost as if he's bringing the authority of King Sidus and saying, well, it's not even up to me. King Sidus has given us the command to do this. So, we will do it, and you have no part in this. So, there's conviction, but there's also some astute wisdom on the part of Zerubbabel.

Well, you know, in our own day, we need to be on our guard against seemingly polite and friendly opposition that would look to water down our witness. We need to do so with firm conviction and astute wisdom sometimes.

[17:06] You know, this is the kind of opposition that we can face from those who maybe say to us, oh, we very much respect the faith communities. You hear this from government sources. Oh, faith communities, they're so important, and we follow you the work that they do, but, you know, we really aren't willing to accept you speaking on these subjects or expressing these opinions.

You know, by all means, do the nice stuff that helps people, but don't be, you know, sticking your nose in to matters that we as the government have decided is the party line.

And so, they're very polite, very civilized, and yet opposing the work that the gospel, of the gospel by God's people.

So, there's this friendly, polite opposition, but then also we're told that the opposition becomes or takes on a different, what shall we say, a different nature in an attempt to discourage God's people. Well, there in verse 4, then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah. They'd been rebuffed by Zerubbabel. They weren't going to be able to get in on the inside, and so they start trying to discourage God's people.

[18:20] And discouragement often is the kind of thing you get from the inside. Here it is, those who have already been identified as being on the outside. But in our reality, isn't it so often the case that we ourselves are the ones who maybe discourage each other in gospel ministry?

Oh, it will never work. You're wasting your time. Or, you know, we could repeat maybe the kind of language that perhaps, you know, maybe not with ill intent, but nonetheless can be very discouraging opposition.

Now, we're not told how the exiles responded, possibly because they didn't, certainly not very successfully, because we know that this opposition proved fruitful. It did, in fact, stop the construction.

So, whatever response there was, it wasn't a very adequate one. What about ourselves? How can we respond to discouraging opposition? I think sometimes it's a case of deciding not to be discouraged, taking that decision, I will not be discouraged.

Now, for that, of course, we do need a measure of faith that looks beyond the immediate circumstances that can be discouraging, and we can't be blind to that. Sometimes circumstances are discouraging, and we need to have that look of faith that sees beyond those discouraging circumstances.

[19 : 38] But the opposition continues. There's not only an attempt to discourage, there's an attempt to frighten. In that same verse 4, we read that not only did the people discourage the people of Judah, but they attempted to make them afraid to go on building.

We're moving into the realms of, or the realm of threats, of violence, or sanctions of one kind or another. And it involved, as we read, lobbying the powers that be and attempting to turn the authorities against God's people.

And this is not so different to the kind of opposition we are increasingly witnessing today, even in our own country. You may have picked up on the case that made some of the local newspapers, certainly down in Dundee, of a Church of Scotland minister who is being squeezed out.

I don't know what the latest state of play is, but squeezed out of a chaplaincy at a secondary school in Dundee on the grounds that he is, so it is alleged, a rampant homophobe.

Now, there's no evidence to justify that kind of accusation, but that's what's being said about him. And the tactics have involved petitions, lobbying of counselors, not dissimilar to what we find here, to build pressure on the man whose only crime is to seek to do the work of the Lord in the school that he has been invited to be a chaplain of.

[20 : 59] And that can be very intimidating. It can be very frightening for one who is the object of this kind of campaign. There is opposition of this nature.

How are we to respond? Well, we need to take courage. We need to be brave. And of course, that courage is grounded not in our own strength to resist, but in the Lord's power to protect and uphold. The opposition then is sometimes very polite, very friendly. It can take the form of discouragement. It can be frightening. It's persistent. In verse 5, we read of how these opponents were lobbying against God's people the entire reign of Cyrus, king of Persia, down to the reign of Darius, king of Persia, presumably the beginning of his reign, because it's Darius himself who then authorizes that the temple be built.

But in any case, we're talking about a couple of decades. Every year, every month, there's this persistent opposition, and it must have been very draining for the exiles.

And then we should expect no less. And in the face of persistent opposition, we need to respond with persevering obedience. But there's one final thing I want to say about the opposition and focus on one particular, quite remarkable truth that can encourage us in the face of any kind of opposition, but particularly in the face of what we might call powerful opposition.

[22 : 27] From verses 7 right through to verse 23. So, this is this whole section of the chapter that's in brackets that relates to a subsequent time in history in the reign of Artaxerxes.

And we've read the chapter. I won't repeat all that's said there. But basically, the story is that the opponents of the Israelites, you know, these are, you know, this is generations who have opposed. You know, it would have been, no doubt, their grandparents would have been their first opponents. But from generation to generation, the opposition continues. And they send this letter to Artaxerxes. And they're focusing on the reconstruction of the city.

The temple's already been rebuilt. But now the Jews are attempting to rebuild the city, presumably the walls and the infrastructure of the city itself. And so, this letter is sent, full of libel and half-truths and slander about the Jews being rebellious people.

You know, we hear today about a growing and concerning anti-Semitism. Today, really, this chapter records for us this reality that there's nothing new under the sun.

[23 : 34] You know, the letter is really an anti-Semitic diatribe against the Jews and the kind of people they are. And warning Artaxerxes, you've got to be careful with these people. You know, they're rebels.

They're, you know, they're always causing trouble. You've got to stop them from building Jerusalem. So, this powerful opposition, the people themselves who write the letter have a measure of power.

But, of course, they direct the letter to the most powerful man in the world at that time, Artaxerxes. Now, Artaxerxes receives the letter. He reads the letter.

We're told, in his reply, we're told that he got his civil servants, I guess, to explore whether this was true regarding the history of the Jews. The civil servants produce, we might call a dodgy dossier, saying, yeah, it's all true.

These people, they're not to be trusted. And, you know, you really should stop them. You know, we see there in verse 19, Artaxerxes, I issued an order and a search was made, and it was found that

this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition. [24 : 40] So, Artaxerxes is persuaded, and he issues this decree or orders that the construction should stop. Verse 21, now, issue an order to these men to stop work so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order.

Obviously, the enemies of the Jews are delighted. They receive the letter, and immediately they go and stop the construction. But, curiously, and also in Providence, we find that they overstepped the mark.

Their authority had been to stop the construction. But what we read in terms of what actually happened in verse 23 is that as soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rahim and Shimshai, the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop.

And the language used here is the language of violence. You know, violence was employed. So, they don't simply say, here's the letter, you've got to stop. You know, down tools. No, there was violence involved. And this is, we get another insight into the nature of that violence in Nehemiah chapter 1.

Because in Nehemiah chapter 1, you remember the occasion when Nehemiah's in Babylon and his friends, his associates, come from Jerusalem and tell him the state of the city and how the walls had been burnt down.

[25 : 59] Well, this is as a result of this action of the enemies of the Jews. And so, there we find it wasn't just that they said, you've got to stop building. They actually, whatever had been built was knocked down and burnt down.

So, they overstepped the mark of what they had been authorized to do. Now, how do we respond to that kind of powerful opposition?

You know, the emperor himself ordering that the work of God should stop, the construction of God's city should stop. How are we to respond in the face of powerful opposition?

Well, the best response that we can have is by trusting in our all-powerful God. Because it is quite remarkable to see the hand of providence all over this episode.

And perhaps the most significant words in the whole chapter are very unpromising words looked at in isolation. But the words that we find in verse 21 that I highlighted in the reading, until I so order.

[27 : 05] So, Artaxerxes, he's sending the letter to tell the Jews to stop building. But then they introduce this clause. I don't know if it's a civil servant who said, oh, you really should introduce this clause.

I don't know. But let's just introduce this until I so order. And you think, well, it's not significant, so what? But it proves to be hugely significant. Why?

Well, what is it that actually happens? When Nehemiah hears of what has happened, the walls of what had been built of them had been burnt down, whatever had been reconstructed had been destroyed.

He approaches Artaxerxes to seek permission to return to Jerusalem. Now, one thing that we don't pick up on when we're just reading Nehemiah chapter 1 is we don't realize just how incredibly dangerous this is.

Because what he's actually doing is he's going to Artaxerxes and he's saying, I know that just last year you decreed that the construction should stop. And I'm going to come and tell you to go back on that.

[28 : 06] Now, we don't find that out by just reading Nehemiah 1. So, what Nehemiah is doing is, you know, humanly speaking, is just an act of lunacy. He's just, you know, it's always saying, you know, implied in his request is this criticism of what Artaxerxes had done.

But he does so. And God in his providence grants him favor in the eyes of Artaxerxes. And I think what, you know, from a human perspective, but ordered by God, what aids Nehemiah is a couple of things for Artaxerxes to respond favorably as he did.

And one of them is definitely, the other is somewhat speculative. One is, when Nehemiah explains to Artaxerxes what had happened in Jerusalem, if Artaxerxes was sharp, unlike our home secretary who doesn't seem to read the things that get to our office, but if he had been reading all the decrees that had been sent, if he's sharp, he's going to say, well, hang on a minute.

How is it that these people who I authorized to stop the construction didn't just stop the construction, they burnt the place down? They didn't have authority to do that. And I wonder if that

irked Artaxerxes. Saying, hang on a minute.

I didn't give permission for that. So already he's kind of ill-disposed to the enemies of the Jews. That's somewhat speculative, but I wonder. But more importantly is, given that he is of a mind to support Nehemiah, his own decree gave the opportunity to do so.

[29 : 40] Because what did the decree say? To stop the construction until I say so. Now we all know from Daniel about these decrees of the Medes and the Persians that shall never be repealed.

Even Artaxerxes couldn't have easily gone against his own decree and decreed something that was opposite to it. But his own decree gave the opportunity for him to say to Nehemiah, oh no, it's okay. It says, until I say so. Well, now I say so. Go back and rebuild the city. Now if that isn't the hand of providence, ordering all of these things for the good and the protection of God's people, I don't know what is.

It is quite remarkable. And of course it's the same God who is protecting and ordering world events in our favor and for the good of the gospel. The same God.

The same God who can ensure that a civil servant introduces a clause in a piece of legislation or favorably dispose a leader or an emperor towards God's people and God's purposes.

[30 : 46] All of this is something that God has ever done and continues to do and ever will do. So how do we respond to powerful opposition? By trusting in our all-powerful God who orders all things for the good of his people.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We acknowledge the reality that there are enemies of the gospel. There are enemies of God's people, enemies of the church of Jesus Christ.

And that enmity will find expression in any number of ways. We pray that you would help us to be wise in identifying such opposition, but particularly wise in responding as we ought.

And above all, help us to respond principally by trusting in you. We thank you for being reminded anew of your absolute power in ordering every detail of world affairs, in favor of your people, and for the fulfilling of your purposes.

And so we are reminded again that nothing will ever frustrate that which you have determined to do. And help us to rest in that reality and above all to trust in the God who orders and works out such a reality.

[32 : 07] And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.