

“Who Is Stopping You?”
Rising from the Ruins Week 2: Ezra 4:1-5 and 24
January 9, 2022 Scott Burgess

Opposition. We all face it at one time or another. Take for example my friend Dave Wollman. Several years ago, he reached out to me expressing an interest in the prison ministry. I went over some of the details with him – when we go in, what our purpose is (running a worship service for the inmates), and how the worship service runs. He decided he did want to come into a service as a guest. So, he filled out all the paperwork and received approval for two visits over a two-week period. The night of his first visit I received a call from the director of the ministry to tell us the service was cancelled. Dave was disappointed, but I explained it did happen occasionally. The next week I received a call informing me there was a special event happening in the prison that night, and we wouldn't be able to hold service. So we re-filed for Dave to be a guest for another two-week period. The approval went through and the next two weeks we had the same problem. For one reason or other services were cancelled and Dave was shut out again.

We face opposition at work and at school. It comes against us in the community, and it even shows up in the home. Sometimes opposition is just a part of our sporting passion, such as the Eagles and the Cowboys feuds. It often rears its ugly head in politics. And it can be especially painful when it comes against our relationships. But of course, opposition does not only come up in the secular world. As we saw in Dave's story, it is also a force in our spiritual life in our walk with Jesus. The bible is full of opposition accounts.

Last week we started out our new sermon series, “Rising from the Ruins.” Doug shared how God used Cyrus, the king of Persia, to command the people of Judah and Israel to return and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. And the people had a new hope.

¹¹ With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: “He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.” And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. - Ezra 3:11

And that is when the opposition started.

⁴ When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, ² they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, “Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.” Ezra 4:1-2

Why would their enemies wish to help them? Many had intermarried with the Israelites left behind. Or perhaps they wanted to add Yahweh to their batting line up of gods. Remember the Gentiles in those days worshipped many gods. Cyrus commanded the rebuilding of the temple to receive a blessing from the God of the Israelites. Other Gentiles would also look at this God as one of many who could help them. Perhaps they are assuming if they helped with the construction, they could become leaders of the temple, and the people. Or maybe their goal from the very beginning was to sabotage the rebuilding. Whatever the reason, the Jewish Leaders say, “No!”

³ But Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.” Ezra 4:3

Like the Gentiles, the Jews had their own reason to refuse their help. They know these volunteers are not from their family tree. They brought their own idol worship to their families. They may have married into the family, but they are not part of the chosen people.

³ Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, Deuteronomy 7:3

They also may be trying to be careful to follow Cyrus's command. He commanded the people of the God of Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. To allow others to help might be considered going against the king's commands, which could be dangerous.

⁴ Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. ⁵ They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia. Ezra 4:4-5

The overt opposition to the rebuilding of the temple has begun.

The writing can get a little confusing here in Ezra 4:6-23. Let me ask you something. Have you ever found the conversation in your growth group, or at a family dinner, has suddenly gone off on a tangent, and you aren't talking about the study material anymore? That is what happens here in the letters to Xerxes and Artaxerxes. The kings of Persia who come into this story are:

Cyrus - 539 to 530 B.C.

Darius I - 522 to 486 B.C.

Xerxes - 485 to 464 B.C.

Artaxerxes I – 465 to 424 B.C.

History tells us the rebuilding of the temple ran from 538 to 516 B.C. which means the only kings involved here were only Cyrus and Darius.

¹² The king should know that the people who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations. Ezra 4:12

The repair of the walls and foundations are a part of the book of Nehemiah, not the rebuilding of the Temple. The writers in Ezra had just gone off on a group tangent, just like we do. Ezra 4:24 brings the conversation back to what's relevant.

²⁴ Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. Ezra 4:24

Chapters 5 and 6 detail how they managed to restart the process of rebuilding the temple.

⁵ Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. Ezra 5:1

The books of Haggai and Zechariah explain a different type of opposition – internal opposition. The builders originally became discouraged by the opposition they faced, as we discussed back in Ezra 4:4-5. They fell back into normal human habits and rather than putting God's home first, they were building their own houses.

And God spoke to Haggai:

²This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’” ³Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴“Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” - Haggai 1:2-4

God works through his prophets.

²Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. Ezra 5:2

The leaders in Jerusalem convinced the local governor, Tattenai, to send a letter asking Darius I to approve a search of the royal archives to see if they could find King Cyrus’s earlier decree.

¹⁷Now if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision in this matter. – Ezra 5:17

Chapter 6 confirms the scroll was found and King Darius decreed the rebuilding of the temple was to be permitted. He even went further, ordering penalties and punishment to anybody in opposition to the rebuilding going forward.

How about you? The Israelites shut down construction for 14 years, until the prophets revealed the path to restart construction. So maybe that should be a guide as to what our steps should be.

- What is God saying to you?
As in everything we do, speaking and listening to God is a pretty good starting point. Prayer, reading scripture, and talking with other brothers or sisters in Christ can help in many ways. Clarifying what is happening, and why it is happening, can lead the way to overcome the opposition. Remember when Paul said, “Pray unceasingly”? I don’t believe he meant that strictly literally. We can’t spend ALL our time praying. But we can be praying at all times; not just when things are going well, or badly. We should be having conversations with God regularly. Our conversations with God are what strengthens our relationships, just as our conversations strengthen our relationships. And the stronger your relationship the easier it is to understand what God wants from you.
- Who is stopping you?
We can usually see who our opposition is, or what. It might be your boss or a co-worker. Maybe your teacher, or classmate. It often isn’t hard to see the person in front of you who is stopping your progress, or the situation that is there. But an important part of our conversation with God brings us to a more general identification of the forces involved. Is the opposition facing you coming from the enemy, or is it possibly from the Holy Spirit?

In February 2009, I was still somewhat of a rookie in the prison ministry. A Woodside group went regularly, but the ministry leaders were always there to take the lead. Then came a night where Cliff Heaton, Dan Regan and I were preparing to head to a service. None of the others were available and we were asked if the three of us were up to running the service. We reluctantly said we could and we headed out. We nervously discussed how we would run things – worship, testimony, and message. By the time we got to the facility, we were confident we would be fine. But as we were checking in, we received some bad news. There was an inmate unaccounted for and there would be no service that night. In thirty-five minutes, we had gone from anxiety to anticipation to disappointment. As we prayed in the parking lot, the recurring theme was the enemy had been against us tonight. However, we were also united in the knowledge that it was a temporary thing, the Lord would support us and we would keep coming back. No defeat, just a roadblock.

It was the next day when it struck me. It hadn't been the enemy that had stopped us. He had been in the car on the drive down, throwing doubt and fear in our minds. He tried to make us think the Lord wouldn't be there to give us our strength.

I then remembered the passage in Acts 16:6-8

“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.” Acts 16:6-8

As he stopped Paul, I believe it was the Holy Spirit that stopped us that night. Why? Maybe we really weren't ready to lead at that point. Perhaps our inexperience at that moment would have been a disaster for us, not to mention those we were there to serve.

- What will you do about it?

By this time, you have hopefully had that conversation with God, and have figured out who, or what, is stopping you. What next? How do you respond to opposition? Society tells us to stand up for ourselves, all is fair in love & war, and fight fire with fire. Is that what God is telling you? Do you respond head on, find a work-around, negotiate or just hope things will get better?

As for me, I find when I am faced with opposition one of the parts of my prayer to God is the Serenity Prayer. In its simple form:

- God, grant me the serenity to accept that which I can't control.

Unfortunately, sometimes the situations that arise are beyond our control and we have to accept it. But that also doesn't necessarily mean we are giving up. We may have to accept **these** specific circumstances, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from them.

- The courage to change that which I can,

It is often easy to decide it isn't something we can control and back down. This is where the courage that comes from your faith can make a difference. Remember Paul's words from Philippians 4:13 – “I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” Jesus gives us the strength to do that which he wants us to do.

- And the wisdom to know the difference.

Possibly the most difficult part – how do we know when to accept it, and when we fight on?

God will help us in our troubles. We just need to listen to him and follow the instructions.

You might be wondering about Dave's story. He started to pray about the ministry, and his desire to join. His cancelled service streak continued with two more attempts. He regularly spoke with God to determine if the prison ministry was something he was being called to or if it was something he was calling for. The answer he got was a clear, “keep trying.” Attempt number seven was a success. After joining us a second time, he realized he wanted to be more than a guest; he wanted to be a part of this.

Opposition will come. We just need to be ready for it and respond the way God would want us to.