

Good morning, my name is Matthew, it's a joy to gather and a joy to bring Christ to you through His word.

If you would, go ahead and open up to Ezra chapter 4. If you do not have a Bible, we have some in the back that would be our gift to you, or you can follow along on the screen.

When's the last time you set out to accomplish or do something important and everything went exactly to plan. No frustrations. No setbacks. No trials. No difficulties. If you are out there, let's talk afterwards, I want to meet you. For the rest of us, we are well acquainted with our own limitations.

It doesn't matter what it is, something big or small, opposition seems to be everywhere.

I remember when Hattie, our first born, was a couple months old, and we were a bit naive in terms of what our expectations were. But we had this wedding to go to in Charlotte, and we were all excited to show off Hattie, being the proud parents that we were, and Ashley had this perfect little wedding outfit for Hattie to wear. We were going to drive straight up to the time of the event, so why not get everyone in their wedding clothes. So that's what we did, and off we go. Well it wasn't till before we even reached Durham that we smelled something quite foul coming from the backseat. Okay, well we will just stop to change her diaper. So we pull into a Starbucks. Then we realize this is not just a diaper change, her entire back and all around her is covered in filth. That's what you call a blowout. If you aren't a parent yet, just wait.

Peeling the soaked clothes off of the child, and it's just everywhere. Wipes don't help. You are trying to get the clothes off and it just smears it in more places.

That was all bad enough, but it hits mama, those were her wedding clothes! So we had to put her in the backup pj's... which, she was just as cute in, but the moment was crushed.

Setback. Opposition.

Isn't this true, whether it's something big, like a career, or a spouse, or raising a family, and these big life goals that we may pursue, or it's something smaller on the day to day, just trying to drive across town, or putting together one of those furniture in a box kits.

It's like Murphy's Law, right? if something can go wrong, it will. Have you ever wondered why that is? The Bible has an answer for that, and actually there was a point when such opposition didn't exist. That was pre-sin. Pre-the fall of man. Frustration is actually built into our existence now as an effect of the curse. When God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden, they were sent into a world that would not go according to plan, a world that would oppose them. They would have to toil by the sweat of their brow, and instead of fruit, the earth would yield thorns and thistles. Hard labor and opposition entered into man's equation.

You might say, yeah i get it, life isn't smooth. So what? Well if all we were talking about was getting to a wedding on time in the wedding outfit, then you are right, it's not that big of a deal. But if there is opposition on different level, an eternal level, then the stakes couldn't be any higher. You see it's my contention this morning that opposition is not random, nor is it neutral, but it comes from somewhere. It comes from an enemy.

And in Ezra 4 this morning, we are going to learn how it is we must fight and overcome this enemy. Let's pray.

1. Know The Enemy

4:1 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, 2 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, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here." 3 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."

The Israelites are returning to the land after having been driven into exile due to their disobedience. God is giving them a second chance. As we saw last week, they have come back and they are putting their priorities where they belong, on worship. It's like they are saying, we got to do this right this time, so we are putting all our energy into obedience and worship of Yahweh.

They've had that clarifying moment when they realize all that matters is God. They repent, and begin the work that God has called them to. They lay the foundation of the Temple, bust out an altar, and have a massive worship service to God, for who God is, what God has done and what God is going to do. This wicked, idolatrous people, have now hit the bullseye in terms of God's will for their lives.

Everything should be smooth sailing from here on out, right? They are now in the flow of the Spirit, being obedient to God, shouldn't the journey be easy now. I mean they aren't rebelling anymore, they aren't trusting in idols anymore, so life should be good, right? Obedience should take away our problems.

Well what we see is a very different picture. Obedience to God is met with opposition. Opposition from where... From their adversaries, v.1, or enemies.

Ezra is setting the stage here for a battle that is going down. There is the people of God on one side and there is the enemy on the other and this will continue throughout Ezra-Nehemiah.

The first thing that I want us to see here is that we must, as the people of God, know our enemy.

2 Kings 17 tells the story of this same people that were moved into the land, and worshipping Yahweh was nowhere on their radar, so much that God sent lions to eat some of them. The king had to send for a priest of Yahweh to come teach them the law of the Lord, which he did. But the people did not give up their other gods, they blended the worship of Yahweh in with the rest of their worship, as they continue with child sacrificing to other gods.

So when they come on the scene here, it might initially look like God's people are being rude or harsh, but they are in fact being wise. Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the other guys, they know the history here. Yes these people, say they worship Yahweh, but they are nothing of the sort. This was more of them saying, we are universalists. We believe in all faiths, as 2 Kings would tell us, "They feared the Lord but also served other gods."

They had other motives for the temple... influence, control, power, it wasn't about Yahweh. (syncretism)

The first thing we see here is that we must know the enemy, and to know the enemy must mean we know God's word. If we don't know God's word we are going to have a very difficult time sorting out who is and is not on our side. Zerubbabel and these guys were well knew God's word, and knew that they had to play by God's rules when it came to building the Temple.

If you don't know the enemy, you can't stand against him. If Zerubbabel had let them come work on the Temple, the whole thing would have blown up. These guys were not about Yahweh.

You might be thinking, okay, well what in the world does this little altercation thousands of years ago have to do with me.

I want to point to the deeper reality of what was going on with them, and it's in this deeper reality that we find our common ground. You see, the deeper reality is that the people of God only really have one enemy. His name is Satan, and he just so happens to be coming against them by way of this people.

Eph. 6, 10 “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Your enemy is not your boss, or a spouse, or a sickness, or president or another people. It's Satan.

Rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, in the heavenly places. Dark spiritual forces that have Satan as their leader. Satan hates everything about God, and he hates all of God's creatures. Satan hates you. He would love for you to be destroyed.

We need to be freshly reminded this morning that we are in the middle of a cosmic war, and we have a very real enemy that is set on our destruction.

So when we think of opposition in our lives, we can't think of opposition apart from thinking about our enemy, or at least at some level, being aware that we are in the context of a cosmic war.

What I want to connect for us from this text is that obedience leads to opposition. Obedience leads to opposition. Obedience is the advancement movement of a kingdom of light into a kingdom of darkness.

It's like obedience triggers a flag (illustration)

Consider a couple passages this morning...

John 15:20

Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

2 Tim. 3:12

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

But I don't want us to only think of the enemy as something out there, something outside, or other than ourselves. Don't we see the enemy working in our own hearts sometimes.

How might we be opposing God's work, in our hearts or in the church? Could you be in ministry for the wrong reasons?

2. Endure The Enemy's Attacks

So this is where we are going to really see where this clan's allegiance falls. Zerubbabel and company tell them, we got this, thanks but no thanks.

4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build 5 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.

Then I want you in your mind, or if you mark in your bibles or taking notes, put a parenthesis bracketing v.6-23.

Ezra is jumping in the time-machine here and fast forwarding ahead to his own time and the time of Nehemiah, showing this continued opposition. As it has been noted here, Ezra is more concerned with thematic development here than chronology. So v. 5 will tie directly to v.24 with a time warp in between.

6 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. (485-464)

By the reign of Artaxerxes, the temple had been standing for 50 years.

(465-423)

7 In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows: 9 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, 10 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. 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 12 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. 13 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. 14 Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, 15 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. 16 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.”

17 The king sent an answer: “To Rehum 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 18 the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me. 19 And I made a decree, and 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. 20 And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. 21 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. 22 And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?”

23 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.

What is Ezra doing here? Why is he jumping forward in time?

He is showing the people of God that the enemy is serious about their destruction, and this is not the first time he will attack. The enemy is consistent and constant.

“He prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.” Does that sound like a lazy enemy? Does that sound like an enemy you don’t need to concern yourself with? He’s not inside watching t.v., he’s on the prowl. You ever seen a lion prowl on the discovery channel. It’s careful and calculated, and singular in focus.

Fighting Satan is not just about resisting him once. That would be nice if you just overcame that temptation one time and it never came back. No, it’s more like the addict, knowing the battle, that everyday considers himself still on day 1. It’s a daily walk. But temptations and attacks can take on multiple forms.

Look at the variety of attacks here too, the Israelites are getting ganged up on by everyone around them, false charges being laid against them, even bribery. At one point called “wicked and rebellious” (how backward is that). That’s the enemy at work.

We aren’t to start thinking there’s a demon under every rock, but we are to see that just about anything in life could come with demonic intent. The goal of demonic attack is to destroy your faith, so I would put anything under the sun that seeks to destroy your faith as opposition from the enemy. That’s right, it could be anything. Your flesh, the world**P**

example of each... Christians in our day and time are the judgemental ones, the bigots, not too different.

Now remember, it’s opposition to God’s will in your life. Not opposition to your will for your life. Satan may just as well feed your desires if he can get you to walk away from God. I know the nature of our current conversation is persecution, but as a sidebar in the larger realm of temptation, Satan may just as well attempt to destroy you with pleasure as he would with pain. I don’t think he really cares, one way or the other, as long as you are destroyed. Whether he gives you so much that you forget God or he takes away all you have and you walk away from God.

The Israelites struggled to endure opposition. The threats got to them, and they caved to the pressure. It says they became afraid. The enemy became greater than their God.

1 Peter 4:12, “12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” 19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

So a rejoicing in Christ now is a foretasting of the rejoicing and enjoyment that you will have when Christ is revealed.

endure as you are being shaped into the likeness of Christ. We must not be afraid but keep on obeying.

He encourages Christians to endure suffering by also pointing us to temporary nature of our suffering compared to the eternal suffering of nonbelievers. God’s judgement is a refining and purifying judgement for those who are saved, so Peter’s argument is from the lesser to the greater, how much more will the suffering be for those who aren’t saved.

Christ's faithful endurance of opposition in the desert to bring us back into the garden we were in the garden centers into the desert. Christ, the faithful one, falsely accused. Endured persecution, even to the point of death. Because Christ endured, we can endure. You will not be tempted beyond what you can bear.

How might the accusations of the enemy be landing on you this morning. Hear the word of the Lord to you... He loves you. He hasn't forgotten you. He's died for you. The cross is the testimony of His love for you.

3. Overcome The Enemy in Christ

24 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.

We see the focus return back to the Temple, we are out of the time-warp, and we see that yes, the Temple work stopped. But in the 2nd year of Darius, the work resumes. This is a loaded statement of grace for us. What we don't see is that this community is struggling, big time. They have fallen victim to their opponents. They are afraid. They are weak. They are defenseless. They are no longer pursuing the will of the Lord. You could consider that they have given up.

If the last point was about Ezra writing to speak about Satan's continued attack, this point is about Ezra writing to declare God's faithfulness to overcome. Just as God was faithful with the temple, so He will be faithful with the city. (speaking to his people in his time).

Then why does the work resume? Because God steps in. He's going to give them His word and stir them up for obedience. He does for them and through them what they could not do themselves.

We get the commentary in the book of Haggai...

1:1 In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." 3 Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 4 "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? ...

12 Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD. 13 Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD's message, "I am with you, declares the LORD." 14 And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, 15 on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.

We are a sinful, broken people. The opposition is too great for us. How are we going to fight? How are we going to overcome? We need a victor that is someone other than ourselves. We are going to overcome in Christ.

Our response to opposition is not to look inward, but to look upward, to Christ.

Christ overcame the enemy in the cross (Colossians), putting him to open shame. The snake has been crushed. We fight from a place of victory. We overcome because Christ has already overcome.

13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

Maybe some of us today are under attack. The work of the Lord has been put off. And we are back to erecting our own lives for our own glory.

Enough. Today is the day to resume the work of the Lord. Repent from your pursuit of the world, repent from caving to the pressure of the enemy, in whatever form it has come, and renew your vigor to serve the Lord.

Christ has overcome the enemy. When He said it is finished, He meant it. It's done. We fight a defeated foe. This is the picture we get in Psalm 23, you have prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies. There is a royal banquet awaiting us in the presence of our enemies.