

Trusting God When Building Stops (Ezra 4:6-24 and Romans 8:31-35) 11-May-25

Ezra 4:6-24

Later Opposition Under Xerxes and Artaxerxes

⁶ At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

⁷ And in the days of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his associates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes. The letter was written in Aramaic script and in the Aramaic language.

⁸ Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:

⁹ Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary, together with the rest of their associates—the judges, officials and administrators over the people from Persia, Uruk and Babylon, the Elamites of Susa, ¹⁰ and the other people whom the great and honourable Ashurbanipal deported and settled in the city of Samaria and elsewhere in Trans-Euphrates.

¹¹ (This is a copy of the letter they sent him.)

To King Artaxerxes,

From your servants in Trans-Euphrates:

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.

¹³ Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and eventually the royal revenues will suffer. ¹⁴ Now since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonoured, we are sending this message to inform the king, ¹⁵ so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place with a long history of sedition. That is why this city was destroyed. ¹⁶ We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates.

¹⁷ The king sent this reply:

To Rehum the commanding officer, Shimshai the secretary and the rest of their associates living in Samaria and elsewhere in Trans-Euphrates:

Greetings.

¹⁸ The letter you sent us has been read and translated in my presence. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Jerusalem has had powerful kings ruling over the whole of Trans-Euphrates, and taxes, tribute and duty were paid to them. ²¹ Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order. ²² Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interests?

²³ As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop.

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.

Romans 8:31-39

More Than Conquerors

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Please have your **Bibles opened** to **Ezra chapter 4 – starting at verse 6**

There’s an **outline** for you to take **notes**. Let me **pray** first. Let’s pray...

Intro/Opposition

This morning, we are going to be talking about **the opposition we face as God's people!**

You may have heard of **John Bunyan** - an English writer and **Puritan Preacher** (1628-1688). He was imprisoned for - preaching without a licence. Government authorities thought locking him up in prison would stop his influence on people! But in prison, he wrote **Pilgrim's Progress**, which became one of the most widely read Christian books – second only to the Bible!

(pause)

You may have also heard of the **French philosopher Voltaire** (1694-1778). He was a **brilliant thinker** but a **fierce critic of Christianity**.

He **predicted** that **within 100 years of his lifetime**, the **Bible would be a forgotten book**, and **Christianity would be extinct!**

He even said: "***It took twelve men to start Christianity; I will show the world how one man can destroy it!***"

But here's the twist: Fifty years after Voltaire's death, the very house where he lived and made his declarations **was purchased by the Geneva Bible Society—and used to print and distribute Bibles!**

(pause)

[Slide-Isaiah 55:10-11]

The Bible is God's Word – and **God's Word says this about itself** – from Isaiah

55:10-11: ***¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields***

seed for the Sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Nothing can stop God's Word!

[Slide-Recap]

We learnt a couple of weeks ago - at the start of the book of Ezra – chapter 1 verse 1 – that a Persian King – King Cyrus – a pagan King – fulfilled God's Word spoken to the prophet Jeremiah – that after 70 years of exile in Babylon - the people of Israel from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin – would return to their homeland of Israel. And that's precisely what happened – King Cyrus allowed the Israelites from Judah and Benjamin to return to Jerusalem in Israel.

Nothing can stop God's Word!

If we take on board nothing else – this morning – that's a great thing to take on board – **nothing can stop God's Word!**

(pause)

[Slide-Recap]

Then last week – we learnt that when the Israelites from Judah and Benjamin returned to Jerusalem - they rebuilt the altar so they could make sacrifices for sin and so they could worship God properly – and they also began to rebuild God's Temple.

Remember – this is what God wanted – it was His plan for them to return and rebuild Jerusalem!

So, as we hit chapter 4 – **we hit a major roadblock – they face opposition – which stops their rebuilding project!**

And remember we said last week – we are a bit like these exiles – because we live in a fallen broken world – and as we live in a post-Christian society. And we said we are rebuilding Jesus' church – here at Toukley – so that we can reach a community that is largely – lost from God.

And as we rebuild – we fill face opposition too!

Opposition is Inevitable (Ezra 4:6-16)

[Slide-1st Point]

My first point is – **opposition is inevitable** – Ezra 4:6-16

We need to understand who the opposition to God's people are - here in Ezra chapter 4.

Before the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin were exiled in 586BC.

Many of the other 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were deported by an earlier Assyrian conquest in 722BC.

As the Assyrians deported the 10 tribes – they also imported foreign people from other conquered lands into Samaria in the middle of Israel (2 Kings 17:24-33)

These new inhabitants intermarried with the remaining Israelites and developed a mixed religion – worshipping Israel's one true God YHWH along with other gods.

It's these Samaritan people in verse 5 (which we looked at last week) – who '*kept bribing government officials to slow down the work*' of rebuilding the temple – during the time of King Cyrus and King Darius.

And it's these same Samaritan people who lodge an accusation against the people of Judah and Benjamin - during the later reign of King Xerxes of Persia in verse 6. But that's not the only opposition – in verse 7 – Persian officials - Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his associates – wrote a letter to the next King of Persia, Artaxerxes.

On top of that Rehum a Persian commanding officer and Shimshai a Persian official/secretary also wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes in verse 8.

We should point out that the opposition is now - not just about rebuilding the temple – but also against the rebuilding of the city walls and the city of Jerusalem itself!

What we have here is a period of sustained intense opposition from various sources!

Amazingly, we are actually given a copy of the letter written by Rehum and Shimshai – from verses 11 to 16.

And notice the letter is written in **Aramaic** – because it was the official common language (lingua franca) used for communication between people who speak different languages.

The letter uses various tactics to convince the King that the rebuild of Jerusalem is a bad idea! The main tactics are:

1. **1st Tactic - Fearmongering** – They warn that if the city is rebuilt, the Israelites will rebel and stop paying taxes (verse 13)
2. **2nd Tactic - Historical accusations** – They claim Jerusalem has a history of rebellion and causing trouble for kings (verse 15)
3. **3rd Tactic - Appeal to the king's interests** – They say they're protecting the king's revenue and authority (verse 16)
4. **4th Tactic - Exaggeration** – They describe Jerusalem as such a “rebellious and wicked city” to portray the rebuilding as politically dangerous and financially harmful to the Persian Empire.

Application: For us - the thing is – as the people of God we will always face resistance when doing God's work.

Those against God's people will use intimidation, false accusations, and political manipulation.

That's precisely the tactic the enemies of Jesus did – to stop people following Jesus and to stop Him becoming popular!

Application: Don't be surprised when our obedience to God brings opposition.

Here's some types of opposition that we will face – some are subtle – some are blatant – some are deliberate – and some are as a result of living in a fallen world:

- We will face **criticism** – perhaps being called hypocritical or that we or brain-washed or fanatics!
- We will face **Discouragement** – from anti-Christian comments, attitudes and laws
- We will face - **False Accusations** – being accused of seeking personal gain or power rather than serving our church – unfounded claims about our conduct or behaviour – disagreeing with us when we're simply teaching what's in the Bible
- We will face - **Rejection** – when we deliver Bibles and when we evangelise
- We may face - **Serious Illness** – which means we can't get involved in the ministries we used to
- We may face **Severe Trials** – family problems, work problems, relationship breakdowns – which stop us being involved in rebuilding Jesus' church
- We may have **Conflicts** – in our family, at work or at church – which consume our time, our thoughts – and prevent us from being involved in God's Work
- And we may have **Times of grief and bereavement** when we lose a loved one – and understandably we don't think like doing anything – let alone rebuild Jesus' Church

Reflection: Have you felt discouraged when God's work in your life met resistance? Well, you're not on your own!

Personally – all those things I've mentioned – I've been through – thankfully not all at the same time – but certainly a few at once.

Recently – we had the students from Christ College here with us.

I spent a whole afternoon having a question-and-answer time with them.

The Christ College lecturer (Jon Pratt) mentioned that the average time a minister spends in ministry these days is 8 years – then they burn out and give up!

So, a student asked me “*Paul, you've been here 12 years – what keeps you going?*”

I thought about that – obviously God's strength keeps me going – but - my answer was “**FOMO**” – which means “**fear of missing out**”

Not fear of **ME** missing out – but the fear of **OTHERS** missing out on Jesus. I want as many people as possible to come and follow Jesus - and to believe in His death and resurrection – for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life.

That's what keeps me going!

If we give up rebuilding Jesus' Church here at Toukley – then people will miss out on Jesus – and God doesn't want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9)

So, my **first point** – **opposition is inevitable**

But don't give up – there's a harvest to be had (Matthew 9:37; Galatians 6:9)

Progress may be delayed, but God is not defeated (Ezra 4:17-24)

[Slide-2nd Point]

My second point is – **progress may be delayed, but God is not defeated** – that's Ezra 4:17-24

When King Artaxerxes received the letter from Rehum and Shimshai – he wrote a **reply**

The gist of King Artaxerxes reply is:

- He ordered a search of the royal archives, which revealed that Jerusalem has a history of rebellion and sedition against kings (verses 19 & 20)
- Based on these findings, Artaxerxes issues a decree to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem until he gives further notice (verse 21)
- The King also instructs the officials to act with diligence and not to neglect this matter, highlighting the importance of preventing potential rebellion (verse 22)

Now although Jerusalem did have periods of rebellion – it was exaggerated which influenced the King's decision

The result of this opposition - was that the rebuild of the city was halted in King Artaxerxes' time (verse 23) – and the rebuild of the house of God (temple) was halted in King Darius' time (verse 24)

Application: For us – we need to realize that just because the rebuilding stopped, doesn't mean God's plans and purpose have!

The king's decree halted the work for years.

But what looked like failure was **only a pause in God's plan.**

For example – look what happened in Covid

We couldn't worship face to face for a while – we couldn't sing for a while – we couldn't have fellowship for a while

But God used that time for us to evaluate – to evaluate what ministries we should keep – what ministries we should have stopped earlier – what ministries we should suspend (SRE and High School Youth were suspended for a while) – and what new ministries are needed (like online services, online Bible Studies)

Another example - If we have a look around the world – where there are wars – like Gaza and Ukraine. Times of war and conflict will always make rebuilding Jesus' church halt – while people simply try to survive

Another example – In countries where Christians are persecuted – that would make rebuilding Jesus' church halt too – and perhaps have these persecuted Christians stop or pause or go underground!

Ezra 4 is saying – this opposition – this delay in the rebuild – does not mean God is defeated.

Application: In the delays, we simply trust that God is still working behind the scenes.

What can we hang on to when it seems like there is a delay?

As we try to rebuild Jesus' Church at Toukley – today in 2025 - and progress seems to be standing still.

We can become quite frustrated that things aren't going how we thought.

But it's not about us – it's about God and His Son Jesus!

We must simply trust God's promises,

As we said at the beginning – God's Word does not return to Him void or empty – He always achieves His plans and purposes!

The Apostle Paul tells us in **Philippians 1:6 – God Finishes What He Starts – Here's what Paul says: “*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion...*”**

The prophet Isaiah reminds us in **Isaiah 40:31: “*But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength...*”**

The bottom line is – God is not defeated by human decisions to harm God's Work. Job - who suffered greatly - says this in Job 42:2: “*I know that you [GOD] can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*”

So, my 2nd point is - **progress may be delayed, but God is not defeated** –He's still on the throne!

God is stronger than any opposition we face, so we can trust Him (Romans 8:31-39)

[Slide-3rd Point]

Which brings me to my final point – **and is the reason why God is not defeated** – and that is - **God is stronger than any opposition we face – so we can trust Him!** – **which is from our New Testament Reading – from Romans 8:31-39** [Please turn there now]

As we look at this passage together briefly

There are **4 truths** we can hang on to as we face opposition

1st truth – **God is for us** (verses 31-32)

We are instantly told by the Apostle Paul – something of great comfort – from verse 31

If God is for us, who can be against us?

It really doesn't matter who's on the other team and against us – we have the All-powerful, All-Knowing and Ever-Present Almighty God on our team!

The way we get on God's team is to come to God's Son Jesus and believe in Him.

Being on God's team - makes us winners!

And the reason we are winners

Is because – verse 32 – *God did not spare His Son – but gave Him up for all!*

What Paul means is - because Jesus died and rose again – He has victory over SIN – He's taken the punishment of sin away and swapped it for forgiveness – and He

has victory over DEATH because He rose again – and He’s purchased eternal life for all who repent and believe in Him!

There’s no sin that Jesus can’t forgive – if we come and say sorry to Him.

And when we believe in Him – we have victory and the certain hope of Heaven

2nd truth – **No accusation against us can stand (verses 33-34)**

Paul’s point is no-one can point the finger at us – and charge us with anything – because Jesus has forgiven us and saved us for Heaven – and He sits in Heaven and intercedes for us – and tells the Father – we are one of His. Jesus has wiped our slate of sin – CLEAN. Which means nobody can point to the list of our sins – they are gone – because of Jesus’ blood!

3rd truth – **We have God’s unbreakable love amidst our trials and sufferings (verses 35-37)**

Paul lists various things we all can face in life — trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword—and he asks whether any of these can separate us from the love of Christ. He concludes that they cannot, because believers may face severe trials, yet God's love remains steadfast. God’s love for us never fails!

So, whatever we are going through in our lives right now – whatever opposition we face - **God’s love is bigger and stronger than all of it!**

And so, Paul says – verse 37 – It’s like we are conquerors – victors – winners – never losers!

4th truth – **Nothing can separate us from God** (verses 38-39)

Paul is saying – nothing we go through in life can take us away from God because Jesus loves us. Paul says he's convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

Application: For us then - victory is ours through Jesus, even when rebuilding stops or pauses for a while!

We simply trust in God's unshakable love when circumstances seem against us!

Reflection: What truths from Romans 8 will you cling to when you're tempted to give up?

Perhaps you could share those truths with someone at morning tea after the service.

Conclusion

To finish up then...

When the rebuilding does stop – or pause —whether it's a ministry, a calling, or a season of spiritual growth—**God has not stopped loving, guiding, or working.**

Trusting Him in the pause is part of walking by faith. His purpose will prevail.

[Slide-2 Cor 5:7]

Let's finish then with **2 Corinthians 5:7** where the Apostle says: "*We walk by faith not by sight*"

Let's pray...

Heavenly Father, we thank you that in the midst of opposition and trials – we know that you are bigger than anything we face. Even when we are faced with stopping our work for you for a while or when our progress is delayed – help us to remember that you NOT defeated – and that we have victory – because of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Help us to know that as we face opposition we can trust you in everything.

Help us to walk in faith and not by sight.

In Jesus' Name. Amen!

Benediction (Isaiah 40:31)

"But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength..."