

The Opposition is Fierce and Relentless

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[0 : 0 0] We come now to our reading from the Bible, and you'll find this, if you have one of our church Bibles, on page 391. It's the book of Ezra, chapter 4.

Page 391, the book of Ezra, chapter 4. The story so far is that about 50,000 of the Jewish people have made the long and difficult journey back from Babylon to Jerusalem.

The year is about 539 or 538 BC. And having got back to Jerusalem, they have begun the rebuilding of the temple, as we saw last week. They've laid the foundations, and there was a great celebration, many of them shouting for joy, some of them weeping.

The older men wept because they looked back to the days when they remembered the first temple, which had been destroyed some 50 years before. So the temple rebuilding project has just started.

But as we will soon see, there's trouble ahead. So Ezra, chapter 4. Now, when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exile were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, 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.

[1 : 1 8] 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 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.

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

And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithradath and Tabael and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes, king of Persia.

The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. Rehum, the commander, and Shimshai, the scribe, wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes, the king, as follows.

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, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnapa deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province beyond the river.

[2 : 5 5] 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 is 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.

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.

[4 : 05] The king sent an answer. To Rahum 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, 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.

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 Rahum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem, and by force and power made them cease.

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.

[5 : 23] This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing and a strength to us tonight. Well, friends, let's open our Bibles again at Ezra, chapter 4, page 391 in our big church Bibles.

My title for tonight is, The Opposition is Fierce and Relentless. Well, let me start with a question.

Are you sometimes astonished at the way our Lord Jesus is opposed? I must confess, I am sometimes.

I say that because, well, think of the way that he's portrayed in the four Gospels. He is the essence of everything that is noble and good about humanity.

Think of his characteristics. Courage, love, integrity, clear thinking, honest speaking, sanity, psychological balance and strength, a deep understanding of people and situations, love for God the Father, prayerful trust in God the Father, a willingness to confront evil, a willingness to live self-sacrificially to the ultimate degree, patience, kindness, gentleness.

[6 : 50] You could go on piling up his wonderful qualities, and yet, in this world, hated, mocked, abused, vilified, and finally put to death after only three years of public life and work.

Why is it that the most wonderful, attractive, delightful, and compelling human being ever to live has been so opposed, was so opposed then 2,000 years ago, and is still so much opposed today?

Now, the answer to that question must be this, that Jesus commands every person in the world to repent of their sin and to submit to his rightful lordship.

And we human beings by nature do not want to acknowledge our sinfulness, and we do not want anyone except ourselves to rule our lives. So until, by the grace of God, we begin to see who Jesus is, we do not want him to rule over us, and we'd rather nail him to a cross than call him Lord.

That surely is why the world hates him. Now, the hatred comes in different forms, maybe as militant intellectual atheism, perhaps as Islamic jihadism, perhaps the sluggish apathy of Western secular materialism.

[8 : 14] And this opposition to Jesus quickly grows into opposition to his followers as well, because we become tarred with the same brush. He said to his apostles in John chapter 15, it's an encouraging thing, if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

So perhaps we shouldn't be too astonished at the depth of opposition to Jesus. If he claims lordship, it should be no surprise that his claim is hotly disputed. Now, this theme of opposition to, not simply God, but to Jesus, surfaces very early in the Bible, in fact, right back in Genesis chapter 3.

You know the story. Adam and Eve have just rebelled against God's authority, egged on by the serpent. And the Lord says this to the serpent, I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring.

He, that is Jesus, the woman's offspring, he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel. So God is telling the serpent and all of us that there will be continual warfare between the Lord Jesus and the devil and all who are influenced by him.

This is the warfare that lies at the heart of the human race. Jesus and his people over against the devil and his people. And we are all in the devil's camp until the Lord opens our eyes and pulls us across the great divide.

[9 : 44] Jesus said, He who is not with me is against me and whoever does not gather with me scatters. So there's no neutral position. We're either on the Lord's side or we're against him.

Now this is why it's no surprise to find opposition to the Lord's work and the Lord's people in the book of Ezra. We noticed just a hint of it last week in chapter 3, verse 3.

Just glance back to chapter 3, verse 3. They set the altar in its place. This is the Jewish leaders. For fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands.

But chapter 4 opens the floodgates and now the opposition comes pouring through. The author makes this plain in the opening words of verse 1 where he speaks of the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin.

Now friends, this chapter is chronologically complicated. I wonder if you noticed that when I read it out. I wonder if little questions passed your mind about how the history is laid out.

[10 : 48] I'll try to unravel the complication in a moment but first let me simply point it out. The first few verses of chapter 4 up to the end of verse 5 are dealing with the same period of history as chapter 3.

Now if you remember from last week, chapter 3 opens in the seventh month. The seventh month after the Jews have returned from Babylonia to Jerusalem. In chapter 3 verse 3, the leaders, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, set the altar of God in its place.

And then about six months later, chapter 3 verse 8, they make a beginning of rebuilding the temple itself. So all this is happening in about the year 538 BC, immediately after they've returned from exile.

The altar is built, that's the very first thing, and then the foundation of the temple is laid. And now in chapter 4 verses 1 to 5, we're still in 538 BC. This is where opposition begins to rear its head.

However, here come the complications. Look at chapter 4 verse 6. We're suddenly in this verse pitched into the reign of Ahasuerus. He was the one who married Esther.

[11 : 58] And his reign didn't begin until 486 BC, about 50 years later. And then one verse later, verse 7, we find ourselves in the reign of Artaxerxes, who came to the throne in 464 BC.

So the long section from verse 7 to verse 23 is all about the opposition to the Lord's people during Artaxerxes' reign. And then, and this is the trickiest moment of all, the last verse of the chapter, that's verse 24, takes us right back to 538 BC.

It doesn't look like it. It looks as if verse 24 reads straight on from verse 23. But it doesn't. Verses 7 to 23 are about the opposition in Artaxerxes' reign to the building of the city and the city walls.

Whereas verse 24 is about the opposition to the rebuilding of the temple, the house of God, which was finished long before the work on the city started. And if in your mind's eye you shift verse 24 back to the end of verse 5, it then makes good sense.

Are you with me so far? Is it as clear as mud? Do come and talk to me afterwards if you'd like me to go over it again. Now, I'm assuming that Ezra himself is the author of the book of Ezra.

[13 : 19] There's no way of knowing that for certain, but I think it's a fair assumption to make. So the question is, if Ezra is the author, why does Ezra set chapter 4 out like this in this rather complicated historical way?

And I think the answer is this. The big thing, the main thing that he's recording in chapter 4 is the opposition to the rebuilding of the temple, 538 BC.

That's where the chapter begins, following straight on from chapter 3. And that's where the chapter ends, as I've just said a moment ago, in verse 24. And chapters 5 and 6 pick up the theme of the rebuilding of the temple, again after a temporary stoppage to the work.

So why do we have these two other sections, this short Ahasuerus section in verse 6 and the longer Artaxerxes section in verses 7 to 23? Well, I think the reason is this, that these two sections are the opposite of historical flashbacks.

They're flash forwards. Now, we're all used to watching films, aren't we, where there are historical flashbacks and sometimes flash forwards as well, because the film director brings in forward flashes and backward flashes to help to explain the main story that we're looking at.

[14 : 33] So the historical flashes shed light on the main action and fill out our understanding of the main action. So in the book of Ezra, the author is saying to the reader, I'm writing in chapter 4 about the temple reconstruction and the opposition to it.

That opposition started in 538 BC. It brought the building work to a halt until about 520 BC when Darius had come to the throne.

That's when the work was able to start up again and the new temple was quickly finished by about the year 515 BC. But, Ezra is saying, this problem of opposition to the Lord's work has had subsequent outbursts.

It's a deep, historically recurring problem. So many years later, in the reign of Ahasuerus, another accusation was made against the Jews. And then, Ezra is saying, 20 or more years after that, in Artaxerxes' reign, there was another great hoo-ha.

A poisonous letter was written to the king about the rebuilding of the walls. And here's the text of it. And I've also got the text of the king's very unhelpful, nasty reply. So here are both of these letters.

[15 : 43] I want you to read them so that you can better understand how the hatred of our God and his people keeps on emerging in history. Now, friends, I hope that's clarified things just a little bit.

It took me some time to see what was going on there, and I had to turn to Bob Files' very helpful commentary on Ezra. Not the first time I've turned to Bob Files for help to see the wood for the trees when it comes to Old Testament history.

Now, don't be anxious about the historical complications of Chapter 4. What I want us to concentrate on now is what Ezra is concentrating on, and that is the fierce, relentless nature of the opposition to the Lord's work.

Forewarned is forearmed. The Lord's work, Ezra is saying, is opposed in every generation B.C. and A.D. We will be opposed in our gospel work in the 21st century.

And this chapter may make us wiser and less naive about opposition when it comes our way, as it has in the past and as it surely will again in the future.

[16 : 46] Now, one more little detail before we get into the text. Have a look at verse 6. In verse 6, we read that the adversaries of Israel wrote an accusation.

Now, the word translated accusation is a word closely related to the Hebrew word for Satan. Satan, as you may know in the Bible, means the accuser or the adversary of God's people.

So for Ezra to use this word *sitana* is a reminder to us that the ultimate source of all opposition to the Lord's work is the devil. Now, the devil is not mentioned very much in the course of the Old Testament.

He's certainly mentioned spectacularly once or twice. But we have to wait for the New Testament before we see him clearly exposed and see his activities brought right out under the spotlight.

But we will never understand the Bible well until we grasp that Satan is real and malignant and hostile and is continually at work to undermine the work of the Lord's people.

[17 : 52] So a little hint like this one here in verse 6 reminds us of who the real enemy is. Remember that verse from John's first letter. He says this, the reason the Son of God appeared it's a great way to start a verse, isn't it?

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. So Jesus came not only to rescue his people but to destroy the power of Satan.

He's not only a rescuer but a conqueror. And the whole Bible is about the outworking of that great victory. So it's no surprise to see the shape of the enemy wriggling and stirring in the mud from time to time.

He gets, as it were, pulled to the surface for all to see in the New Testament. But in a verse like our verse 6 here we see a little movement in the mud just enough to remind us of who is at work behind the scenes.

Behind the human opposition to the Lord's work is the satanic opposition. Well let's look now at the way the opposition comes. How does the enemy of God's people try to frustrate their work?

[19 : 02] Well the opposition comes in a variety of forms within chapter 4 here. So we'll look at three of them. First, there's smarmy sidling up.

Smarmy sidling up which is of course a form of deception. Have a look again at verses 1 and 2. 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 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 Asahadon, king of Assyria, who brought us here.

Now what the people say here in verse 2 sounds so friendly, doesn't it? So supportive. We'll build with you. You've made this long journey back. It's been difficult.

We know what it's like around here. We'll join in this great work of rebuilding the temple to Yahweh. Let's be friends. Let's be co-workers. After all, we worship your God as you do.

In fact, we've been worshipping him for a long time, ever since the days of Asahadon, king of Assyria. Now remember, we're in 538 BC. Asahadon had been the king of Assyria about 140 years earlier.

[20 : 22] And back in those days, he had indeed relocated quite a lot of people from the Assyrian Empire to the land of Israel. And there had been an attempt made by various Jews to reintroduce these people to the worship of Yahweh.

A Jewish priest had been sent to instruct them for a while. The story is told in 2 Kings 17 if you want to look at the gruesome details. But they are gruesome because what these Assyrian people did was to take on board the instruction from the law of Moses up to a point.

But they then mingled it with the pagan practices that they already knew and loved. So they continued to worship idols with names like Sukkoth Benoth, a Babylonian god, Nergal, Nibhaz, Tartak, Adramelech, and Anamelech.

And they also, in inverted commas, feared the Lord. But of course they didn't really fear the Lord because the very first commandment of the Ten Commandments insists, you shall have no other gods but me.

So these people were what you would call syncretists. Syncretism is trying to bring in elements from a number of different faiths making a kind of hodgepodge. Perhaps they thought they were hedging their bets by bringing in bits and pieces from different religions.

[21 : 45] Perhaps they thought if one godlet doesn't bless us with sunshine and rain and good crops maybe another godlet will. Don't put all your eggs in one basket Mrs. MacKillop. Perhaps they said to each other.

So when they said here in verse 2 we worship your God as you do and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Asahadon at one level they were telling the truth but at another level they were concealing the fact that they were also worshipping all these other monstrosities.

The true God requires that we worship him and him only. Now you can see from verse 3 that the leaders of the Jews Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the others they immediately saw through this smarmy sidling up and they immediately said to them no you have nothing to do with us you are certainly not going to help us to build the temple to our God.

We alone will do the building thank you very much. Now what do you make of their response? Does it seem a bit harsh and standoffish?

Does it make you want to say come on Zerubbabel and Jeshua be a bit gentler I mean these people after all are your new neighbours you've got to live with them close to them from now onwards don't destroy your relationship with them by slapping them down on day one?

[23 : 08] Ezra however means us to understand that the Jewish leaders were doing the right thing he tells us in verse 1 that these people are the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin so what do we learn from this in our own day?

We learn that lines have to be drawn Christian people who love the Bible and seek to honour the Lord who gave us the Bible cannot enter into joint projects with those who don't share those fundamental convictions now this is why our church the Tron Church decided rightly to part company with the Church of Scotland a few years ago because the Church of Scotland was walking away from the Bible now as you know that was a most painful and difficult decision but it had to be taken let me give another example much more trivial but significant all the same I used to be the minister of a parish in Burton-on-Trent in the Midlands and a couple of months after we'd moved I think we moved into the parish in September and when it got to about November that first year I discovered that for some years all the churches in that immediate area had sent out a joint Christmas card around the streets listing the times of Christmas services at the different churches and the message was come to any of these

Christmas services and you'll be warmly welcomed now the implication was we all believe in the same thing and we all share the same gospel so come to any of these churches and you'll be okay but I knew that we didn't share the same gospel so I discussed this with several of our leaders in the congregation and we decided that we ought to withdraw from being involved in the Christmas card project in particular I remember writing to the Roman Catholic priest to explain why our church could not unite with him in this project he was a mild and gentle soul and didn't put a brick through my window but I found it really quite a difficult decision to make because I knew that I and our church would be interpreted as being standoffish and unfriendly and I was very new into the town and didn't especially want to be categorized as the nasty new vicar of St. Peter's Church but lines have to be drawn now let's of course be friendly to people on the personal level if your next door neighbors are liberal

Church of Scotland folk or Roman Catholics of course you're going to befriend them on the personal level you'll help them in practical ways you'll look after their goldfish when they're on holiday for example you'll seek to have gospel conversations with them but Zerubbabel and Jeshua show us how to say no when a joint project is proposed and when the proposal comes from people who don't follow the Bible's understanding of the Lord Don Carson who's been here to our church a few times about 20 years ago wrote a very big book called The Gagging of God subtitled Christianity Confronts Pluralism it's quite a tough read but it's a tremendous book I remember when I first opened this book and read it and looked down the contents page of the titles of the different chapters I chuckled as I saw one of the chapter titles which read this on drawing lines where drawing lines is rude isn't that a great chapter title we have to draw lines even in an atmosphere where drawing lines is thought to be rude standoffish harsh unfriendly etc etc so there's the first way in which opposition comes in Ezra chapter 4 smarmy sidling up and they said no now secondly there's the drip drip discouragement tactic and this comes in verses 4 and 5 that outwardly friendly tactic has failed

Zerubbabel and Jeshua have said no to it so now verse 4 the people of the land as they're described start a campaign of discouragement now I say campaign because a more literal translation would read then the people of the land were discouraging the people of Judah and making them afraid to build and bribing counsellors against them to frustrate them so it wasn't a single action it was an ongoing week in week out year in year out pressurizing of the Jews which made them lose heart or as verse 4 puts it afraid to build and you'll see from the end of verse 5 that this went on for years all the days of Cyrus and right up to the reign of Darius that's the best part of 20 years it says they were even bribing local officials to oppose the Jews it's not difficult to imagine how this might have worked with a local official stick a few crisp banknotes into a town councillor's back pocket and get him to call round on the church leaders my name is Smith and I sit on the town council for the old town area and I've come to tell you folk who've recently moved here from Babylon to Jerusalem that the feeling of the city in general is very much against this idea that you have of rebuilding your shrine and your temple

[28 : 21] I've been approached by many different people that's a good tactic say that there are many people I've been approached by many different people some of them really angry people very perturbed they are threatening violence some of them you would be best advised Mr. Zerubbabel and you Mr. Jeshua Joshua to curtail your operations we're not wanting violence in this city now are we then look on to verse 24 at the end of the chapter I explained earlier that that verse runs on straight incense after verse 5 and verse 24 tells us that this pressure brought the work on the temple to a complete standstill until the second year of Darius' reign almost 20 years in which the foundations are sitting there in the sunshine and the rain but nothing else is happening it's the pressure of an antagonistic majority with the threat of violence always lurking in the background the threat of violence is a real pressure we've heard very recently just a few weeks ago from our mission partner

Sam Lee who works in Southeast Asia that a young colleague of his has become rather fearful of sharing the gospel with local people you remember that some of you now this man this colleague is without doubt a fine Christian he wouldn't have gone out there to Asia if he were not but the pressure of intimidation is undermining his confidence we must pray for him Zerubbabel and Jeshua they were men of character we've seen that in their words in verse 3 but they were browbeaten by this drip drip of pressure and it wasn't until the prophets Haggai and Zechariah if you look at chapter 5 verse 1 which will be there next week but just have a glance at chapter 5 verse 1 it wasn't until these two prophets were raised up and began to prophesy to the Jews it was only then that Zerubbabel and Jeshua recovered their confidence and took up the work again some 20 years later 20 years of being psychologically shackled paralyzed so what are we to make of this element in the book of Ezra the author is showing us how the courage of believers can indeed fail when the pressure is put on but he is surely also saying to us don't be as the Jews were for those 20 years let their failure of courage be a warning now friends we live today in interesting times compare in your mind's eye for a moment a member of our church aged 70 plus with a member of our church aged 20 both Christians keen Christians both want to serve the Lord but those two people 50 years or so apart they grew up in very different circumstances the 70 year old grew up in a world in Britain where the church was largely respected or at least tolerated and where few people would dare to poke fun at it or to speak disrespectfully of God or of the Lord Jesus the 20 year old

Christian knows nothing of that world at least not from personal experience his or her experience is of a world where the gospel is often held up to ridicule and where Christians are portrayed either as Jurassic dinosaurs or as weirdos it takes more courage it seems to me to be a 20 year old Christian today than to have been a 20 year old Christian 50 years ago Ezra therefore is teaching us to take courage let me ask would you pray this prayer Lord Jesus next time I'm with people who are dishonoring you slandering you or despising the gospel help me not to keep quiet but to open my mouth and do verbal battle for your honor even if I get smacked in the mouth for speaking up Amen would you pray that prayer Ezra is showing us the effects of drip drip intimidation verse 24 then the work on the house of God stopped and ceased well let's look now at the third form of opposition which is to get the legal system to outlaw the work of God get the powers that be to declare it illegal now we're used to this globally in modern times where a number of regimes around the world have suppressed the church and its activities by force of law it's been a familiar tactic in communist regimes and plenty of it of course goes on today even in countries that profess to exercise freedom of religious practice so let's see how Ezra presents this in its 5th century

BC from verses 7 to 23 describe an exchange of letters a letter is written to Artaxerxes the Persian king in about 460 BC it's written by a group of senior government officials who are running the province of Trans-Euphrates described in verse 10 as the province beyond the river now the promised land Israel formed a very small part of this big province right at the western extremity on the Mediterranean border a long way from Susa the capital which was near the Persian Gulf the letter that was written is reproduced in verses 9 to 16 and then the answer to it sent by the king is reproduced in verses 17 to 22 now the first letter is a corker let's notice three things about it first of all it's bombastic self-importance verse 9 Rehum the commander

Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates and note this great long list the judges the governors the officials the Persians the men of Erech the Babylonians the men of Susa that is the Elamites in case you didn't quite know and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappa deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province beyond the river in other words we your majesty are a group of very important and very influential people and it will be in your best interests to hear what we have to say you see how they're pulling rank no monarchy is ultimately very stable it wasn't so long ago that we beheaded Charles I 1649 and the whole Stuart dynasty was ousted only a few decades afterwards kings and emperors are wise to listen to their senior supporters if they don't want to lose their thrones or their heads so these men compile this impressive sounding list notice the titles commander scribe judges governors and officials and notice the international flavor persians babylonians elamites people of erich and susan the persian empire rather like the old soviet empire of the 20th century consisted of a number of distinct nations which had all been swallowed up under one great rule so the letters authors are saying to king artaxerxes we represent a very broad spectrum of opinion you can't just dismiss us as if we're just a little bunch of anti-semitic blockheads we represent the length and breadth of your great empire which was no doubt a massive exaggeration but that's the first thing self-importance then secondly they are massaging or rewriting history in verse 10 they speak of the great and noble

[36 : 22] Osnappa now Osnappa had been an Assyrian emperor about 200 years previously and he was neither great nor noble he was usually known as Ashurbanipal and he was a vicious bloodthirsty horrible tyrant who had made life miserable for huge numbers of people not least for those that he deported from Assyria to Israel and other places so the way that verse 10 describes his actions simply whitewashes him makes him sound like a benevolent dictator who was kind enough to move people around his empire of course he caused them great suffering then in verse 12 the letter speaks of Jerusalem as that rebellious and wicked city well yes it had resisted superpower aggressions in times past but to smear its name as being somehow perpetually rebellious and wicked was undeserved massaging history can be a powerful form of deceit and then thirdly the letter appeals to the blatant self-interest of the king look at verse 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 and we wouldn't want that for your majesty would we and your majesty wouldn't want that for your majesty would you suggest to a king that the health of the royal coffers is in danger and he will quickly prick up his ears and listen if there's one thing governments always need a bit more of it's money so this letter is pompous and bombastic it massages history and it goes for the jugular in terms of royal self-interest it is not a good letter there's no careful argument there's no presentation of statistics or any objective criteria against which the Jews behavior might be measured it's just smears and scaremongering but it works the king immediately does as Rahum and Shimshai ask and he has the power of lawmaking throughout the empire what when the king says it it happens he hasn't got to go to the house of commons and have his case argued back and forth and then voted on he hasn't got to be like president obama who tries to get something passed through congress and finds he can't get it through no he is the

Kim Jong Un of Persia he shouts loudly everybody jumps to attention and starts to behave badly therefore he says in verse 21 in his reply letter make a decree that these men be made to cease do you want my interests to be damaged verse 22 so this opposition becomes enshrined in state law it's no longer just personal or local it's now official it comes from Susa the capital it bears the name of the awesome Artaxerxes himself only a fool dares to mess with him he gives the order and the work stops well friends we're nearly done but let me just make one or two closing observations which I hope will be encouraging to us we need to see an episode like this within the bigger picture of the whole Bible and the whole Bible assures us of two unquestionable truths first opposition to the

Lord's work will come again and again and again when it does come we might be tempted to think what are we doing wrong to have drawn this hatred against ourselves very often however opposition to the Lord's work comes because Christians are doing right not wrong as Jesus says if the world hates you know that it has hated me before it hated you the world does not want God to be God or Christ to be the Lord who commands allegiance so when the forces of godlessness see the work of God going forward and gaining strength the world says enough of this we must resist it so the opposition will keep on coming at one level the whole of the New Testament is a record of the opposition to Jesus to his message and to his followers he is opposed by the Pharisees by Pontius Pilate and by

King Herod and then later on the apostles are opposed particularly by Jews but also by Gentiles some of you may remember the series of sermons that Willie Philip preached to us through the Acts of the Apostles I think it was about five years ago the feature of those sermons which I remember above all others was this that Acts is a record of advance followed by resistance followed by advance followed by further resistance and so on right the way through the book in fact whenever I teach anything from the Acts of the Apostles to our Cornhill students I always write at the top of my notes remember snakes and advance then advance now the advance wins in the end that's what the Acts of the Apostles is all about the word of God spreads the cause of the snakes is always doomed but the opposition is relentless and keeps coming at the Lord's people and it's like that right the way through the

Bible and it's like it today and just think again of our own congregation for a moment the Tron did you think those of you whose memories date back a few years did you think as we came through our great difficulty and struggle by the grace of God four years ago did you think that after the storm there would be a long lasting calm that after the gale force winds we could expect years of peace and quiet with the enemy slumbering in his arm chair and paying us no so did I at times and I had to slap myself on the wrist and tell myself not to be so foolish it's precisely when the work of building the Lord's house advances that the enemy wakes up leaps out of his arm chair to make trouble organizing either assault from without or disunity from within so a passage like this in Ezra 4 is a reminder that opposition comes when the

[42 : 53] Lord's people roll up their sleeves to the work it may come through smarmy palli sidling up it may come through drip drip discouragement it may come through legislation sponsored by the state but it will come so let's be watchful and let's be prayerful and then second the other unquestionable truth is that the Lord's purpose to build his house and his household is a purpose that no amount of devils or atheists can thwart there will be temporary difficulties and setbacks but look at chapter 5 verse 1 after 20 years of standstill the Lord then raises up two prophets Haggai and Zechariah you can read their sermons their prophecies in the books that bear their names at the end of the Old Testament and they had some pretty rough and tough words for the Israelites at times but started and Zerubbabel and Jeshua though by this time they were older and greyer they were still there and they rose to the challenge and the great encouragements as well which the

Lord's prophets brought to them and the work went forward and within five years a short time the temple building was finished 515 BC so friends the encouragement is for us to keep at it building the Lord's church by his grace and strength in which we're all involved older ones can I have a word with you for a moment older ones this is no time to say I'll take a back seat now and let the younger ones take the strain younger ones a word for you this is no time to say this is rather challenging I think I'll go back to the world no to go back to chapter one verse two the Lord's charge is no longer at Jerusalem but for us a house that stretches out to the ends of the earth let's bow our heads and we'll pray our dear heavenly father we do thank you for this tale of advance and setback of joy and rejoicing but also tears and difficulty and we pray that you will arm us and help us to be thoroughly realistic about the strategies of our enemy and we thank you so much dear heavenly father that the

Lord Jesus himself promised that he would build his church and not even the gates of hell could prevail against it we pray that you give us great confidence in that promise and help us to set our shoulder to the work with great enthusiasm and joy and we ask it in Jesus name Amen