

4. Facing Opposition (4Q 2019—Ezra and Nehemiah)

Biblical Material: Ezra 4:1–5, 2 Cor. 6:14, Ezra 5:1–5, Haggai 1, Ezra 4:6–24, Nehemiah 4, Neh. 6:1–13.

Quotes

- Just as we develop our physical muscles through overcoming opposition—such as lifting weights—we develop our character muscles by overcoming challenges and adversity. *Stephen Covey*
- Success is not measured by what you accomplish, but by the opposition you have encountered, and the courage with which you have maintained the struggle against overwhelming odds. *Orison Swett Marden*
- Strong people are made by opposition like kites that go up against the wind. *Frank Harris*
- Resistance is a sign that shows you're going the right way. *Constance Friday*
- If you go about dehumanizing your opponents... you're never going to convince them to change. *Marushia Dar*
- The goal in most conflicts is to destroy your opponent. The goal in apologetics is to win your opponent. *Ravi Zacharias*
- The prophet incites the people to action in building the temple of the Lord, by stating the judgments that in the providence of God had fallen upon them for sitting down in inactivity because of the opposition of their adversaries. They should have gone resolutely forward in their work from the time of Cyrus, for they had the mandate of the God of Heaven and the legal authority of the Persian empire for the rebuilding of the temple. *J.N. Andrews*

Questions

What are some of the ways we can deal with opposition? What do we learn from the approaches taken by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah? Are there ways in which we create opposition? In terms of the great controversy, what is the basis for opposition? How can we develop good ways of defusing controversial and antagonistic situations?

Bible Summary

“The local people set out to intimidate the people of Judah and make them too scared to go on building. They bribed officials to oppose them and to obstruct their plans. This continued during the whole reign of Cyrus king of Persia up until the reign of Darius king of Persia.” Ezra 4:4, 5 FBV. We cannot be partners with wickedness (2 Cor. 6:14). The prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged Zerubbabel and Jeshua to work on rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 5:1–5). The message from Haggai is contained in Haggai 1. The enemies of the Jews wrote letters in the time of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) and Artaxerxes. The latter letter led to a stop order on the rebuilding work in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:6–24). “When Sanballat and Tobiah, and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, heard that the repair to the walls of Jerusalem was progressing and that the gaps were being filled in, they were furious.” Nehemiah 4:7 FBV. See also the rest of this chapter. The rebuilding of the walls was completed (Nehemiah 6), despite a plan to assassinate Nehemiah.

Comment

We all face opposition in our lives, in various ways and to various extents. How we respond is the significant aspect, and we see examples in this week's study. First we have to recognize that there would certainly have been opposition in Babylon to allowing the Jews to return. This is clear from the concern shown in trying to convince the respective kings to allow the return and the rebuilding.

But even once the initial hurdle is cleared, local opposition stymies the attempts to rebuild. After an initial attempt to subvert the plan "diplomatically," the enemies revert to type and directly work to counteract the rebuilding program. They are so successful with their intimidation and bribery that there is little progress for years. For those already occupying the land there was no incentive to create a "new Judah" that would compete with them. They would do their best to prevent any "reoccupation" of Jerusalem by the Jews, and they played every card they could, misrepresenting what the Jews were doing to the authorities and deliberately obstructing in different ways.

It must have seemed an impossible task to the small number who had returned to Jerusalem. They were up against the ruling system—both the Persian king and officials, and also the local rulers. Imagine trying to accomplish this without any support, except as the locals were forced to. It would have been easier to stay back in Babylon—and many did!

So what lessons do we learn? That despite all the problems and opposition, they were successful—at least in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and reinstating their worship services. But beyond that—did they really understand and fulfill the role God had originally intended?

Like us, they were operating at a far lower level than what God would have wanted. However we must also recognize the humanity here—they were coming back from Babylon after defeat and humiliation. It could not have been easy to conceptualize a restored Jerusalem, let alone accomplish it. So we should learn lessons both of determination, and of compassion. We face our own struggles in life, and we are called to be victorious, but we also recognize faults and failings. But in the same way as God did not give up on his people, and helped in return in different ways at different times, so we can be assured that God is still with us, and will help work out his plan for our lives in the best way he can with our cooperation.

Ellen White Comments

The Lord never designed to send out His servants to do a work for Him, with all the opposition of Satan and evil angels against them, unless He gives them divine help. The reason that we do not have greater success in the work is that we depend on our own efforts rather than upon the help God will give us. . . . Consider how Satan rules his agents and works through them to do his work of darkness and deception. It is your privilege to believe that Jesus will work more earnestly for you so that you can do His work. . . . {CTr 126.2}

True Christianity will always be aggressive, and wherever it exists it will arouse enmity. All who live a conscientious life, who bear testimony of the claims of God, of the evil of sin, of the judgment to come, will be called the disturbers of Israel. Those whose testimony awakens apprehension of the soul offend pride and arouse opposition. The hatred of evil against good exists as surely now as in the days of Christ when the multitudes cried, "Away with this man!" "Release unto us Barabbas." There is no kind of evil in our world but that some have an interest in maintaining it. Evil is ever warring against good. And since we know that the conflict with the prince of darkness is constant and must be severe, let us be united in the warfare. Cease to war against those of your own faith. Let no one help Satan in his work. We have all that we can do in another direction. . . . {CTr 356.2}