

Ezra chapter 4. Well, as we came to the end of Ezra 3 last Sunday evening, it would be accurate to say that things ended at the closing of chapter 3 on a relatively high note. The people of God had just laid the foundation of the temple back in Jerusalem, It was much rejoicing and thanksgiving. Things were not all good. You had some older people who were present who could remember the previous temple that had been built and then destroyed, and they remembered that previous temple from many decades earlier, and they wept because they were not able to appreciate God's work in their midst because they were stuck in the past, so it wasn't all perfect, but on the whole, it ended on a high note. The foundation of the temple had been laid. The next task before them was simply to finish building the temple. So that should be easy work, you might think.

Well, that brings us to Ezra chapter four. As we come to this chapter, Ezra four, let us pray and ask God to bless the reading and preaching of the word. O Father, you are sovereign, pour out your spirit. In the name of Christ we pray, amen. Ezra chapter four, this is the word of God. Apart from his spirit, we can do nothing. Let us give our attention to it.

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 father's 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. But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of father's 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 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. In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithradath and Tabal and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes, king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. Rahum, the commander, and Shimshai, the scribe, wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes, the king, as follows. Rahum, the commander, and Shimshai, the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Uruk, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnapper deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province beyond the river. 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, an 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 the king 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."

The king sent an answer to Rahom 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. 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 Rahom and Shimshi, 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 Darius, of the reign of Darius, king of Persia. Thus ends the reading of God's holy word. May he bless now the proclamation of it to our lives.

Well, our text today in Ezra chapter 4 is not so much chronologically structured as it is thematically structured. Ezra chapter 4 spans roughly 80 to 100 years, from 536 to sometime during Artaxerxes reign, which would have been in the mid 450s. So roughly 80 or so years are covered in this chapter, but it's not always entirely chronological as we will see.

Why is that? Because it's thematic. It's as if the author begins to get going on a particular theme and he wants to trace that theme over the course of a number of decades in the life of the Israelites. So what is that theme that he is tracing throughout this chapter?

It is the theme of God's people facing opposition. And you see in our text that God's people face opposition in three ways. God's people face covert, overt, and dogged opposition. Covert, overt, and dogged opposition. So first this evening, God's people face covert opposition. You see this covert opposition in the first three verses of Ezra chapter 4. In verse 1, we read of these adversaries. Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard. So these adversaries come on the scene in chapter 4 verse 1. These are the enemies of the people of God. But they do not come outright and say that they're enemies. They come in a covert manner. They pretend to be friends, but in their hearts, they are harboring wickedness against God's people.

And they come after they hear something. What is it that they hear in verse one? They heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord. So they hear that God's people are rebuilding the temple to Yahweh, and this makes them upset. This disturbs them. They don't want Yahweh to be worshipped. And it's often right when you strive to worship God that God's adversaries, the adversaries of God's people, are going to want to stop you. It's perhaps the case that they didn't mind having the Israelites as neighbors, so long as they didn't worship Yahweh too seriously, as long as they weren't too committed to the worshiping of Yahweh. But when they began to get very committed to this worship, when they began to rebuild the temple, they heard about this, and this bothered them.

And you see, nothing's really changed, has it? As long as you're worshiping Jesus Christ, your Lord and Savior, and it's kept to yourself in a nice private way, the world won't mind too much that you worship the Lord Jesus Christ. But

as soon as you begin to take it very seriously, as soon as they begin to hear about it because you just talk about him. You simply love him. He's simply who you adore.

That is when the world begins to get frustrated with you. Your adversaries begin to show themselves. Your enemies show their real heart against God and against you as a follower of God. As soon as you start to hold the exclusivity of the gospel, that there is actually only one way of salvation, and that's the Lord Jesus Christ. That bothers people. They don't mind if you worship Jesus Christ, that you believe He's the Lord and Savior of sinners, so long as you aren't very clear that this is the only way, that there are not other ways to God, that it's either Christ or it is eternal wrath, that there are no in-betweens.

This bothers people. You get labeled things, at least in the world, like bigot and intolerant and closed-minded. But is it? intolerant, is it bigotry, is it being closed-minded to tell people who are on a way to throwing themselves into eternal hell that there's a way of salvation? Is that bigotry?

To inform someone who's going to cast themselves into eternal hell that there's a way of escape and his name is the Lord Jesus Christ. Repent and believe in him and you will be saved. Is that being closed-minded? Or is that loving people and telling them what they need to hear, which is that there is a way of escape, that you can be saved. That is not bigotry, that is loving people.

After all, didn't Jesus say lots of things like repent and believe for the kingdom of God is at hand. Believe in the gospel, repent and believe in the gospel. Didn't he say that I am the way, I am the resurrection, I am the life, I am the light of the world. He is always making exclusive claims that he is the only way, that he is the only answer.

So if that's being closed-minded and being a bigot, then you just simply have to acknowledge that Jesus then by that definition is a closed-minded bigot because he told people that there is salvation in no one else but himself and that you must come to him and you will be saved. And Jesus did that because he loved people, because he cared about eternal souls and the worshiping of his name and his father's name and the Holy Spirit. So you proclaim these truths in your life. You proclaim them not because you're a bigot, you proclaim them because you love God and you love other people.

But it's at this very point of their worshiping of God in the rebuilding of the temple that the adversary shows up. And what do they say in this covert opposition? Verse two, let us build with you, for we worship God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, who brought us here. They come and they say, in essence, we're your friends. We actually have been worshiping God just like you do. In fact, funny story, we started worshiping him long ago when Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, put us here. We've been sacrificing to him. We'd really like to come alongside of you and help you get that temple completed. We saw you were working on it. You might need a hand. We love carpentry. It's our favorite. Can we help you?

And then God's people rightly have this response in verse three. You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God. You see, they're not allowing them to claim this God as their own because they have not. 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. You see, this is a hard no. They do not flirt with the enemies of God.

And that's a warning to the church today. Do not flirt with the enemies of God and your enemies for that matter. And often in the church, people do flirt with enemies. They do it very often. I know that that doctrine is unbiblical, but you know, maybe we should try to understand them and hear where they're coming from. Let's really invest and pretend like there might be something there that we need to hear. You know, sometimes things are just wrong because God's word says it's wrong.

And it's not being unkind to just lovingly say that something is out of accord with the doctrines of the scriptures. There's no need to flirt with the enemies of God where their doctrine is evil, where their practice is wicked. Don't pretend like it is otherwise. It's not good for them and it's not loving God. Paul in Romans 16 verse 17 says this, I appeal to you brothers to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught. Avoid them. It's a command.

He says to avoid these sorts of enemies Do not flirt with enemies Jesus Christ Did not ever flirt with the enemies of God He loved them But he never pretended like their wicked doctrines or evil lives Were good He loved them He spoke to them, but he didn't tell them that their false doctrines and their false ways of living were good. He says to the Pharisees, John chapter eight, you are of your father, your father, the devil, the father of lies. You're a liar just like him. That's what he said to the Pharisees.

He didn't flirt with them. He didn't tell them, you know, you think you're kind of onto something here. He said to the woman at the well, you have had five husbands and the man with whom you are living right now is not your husband. He didn't flirt and pretend like she wasn't living in sin.

He called it, he called it out. He comes to the temple and he flips over the tables. And he says to them, you have turned my father's house, which was to be a house of prayer into a den of robbers. He did not flirt with the enemies of God. Now that doesn't mean he didn't love them. We know he loved them.

We were his enemies. Jamie was talking about that in Sunday school. We hated God and God hated us until in Christ, he brought us to himself. We were underneath the wrath of God. He brought us lovingly to himself, but we were his enemies before he brought us to himself. And so even though Jesus spoke to his enemies, he loved them when he spoke to them and he loved them in such a way that he would speak to them the truth.

He wouldn't flirt with them. He wouldn't pretend like they were right when they were wrong. And that's a caution to the church and to all of us to not flirt with our sins, to not pretend like our personal sins or the sins around us are not sin. Lovingly. addressing them and standing firm as these men did. That's the covert opposition, but then we see this overt opposition in verse four and five.

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." So having failed in their more covert attempts to stop the rebuilding of the temple, they come back with a more overt attempt. And when they come with this more overt attempt, they discourage them, the text says, Now

how exactly they discouraged them, we don't know. It doesn't give us the description, but perhaps they at least used some sort of intimidation. The particulars are not given to us. But then after trying to discourage them, we also read that they hired some counselors, some lawyers essentially, to go back to Persia and convince the Persian kings or people in charge that they should stop this rebuilding project.

It works, at least for a little while. It works until a future king is raised up named Darius, and it's particularly in the second year of Darius that they're able to start building again. You read about that actually in the final verse, the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

So for roughly 16 years, what this means is for roughly 16 years, God's people were halted in the rebuilding of the temple. For 16 years. You can imagine how difficult this must have been for God's people during that 16 year period. You can imagine the kinds of temptations that they would have battled in their hearts as they thought about this fact that year after year is passing and we're not rebuilding the temple. And why aren't we rebuilding the temple?

Because we were uncompromising in our convictions to let the adversaries help us. You can imagine they might have thought to themselves, if we had just let those guys help us, we could have already built this temple by now. Maybe we shouldn't have been so uncompromising. Maybe we should have just let those adversaries help us build this temple. I mean, they're not that bad after all. I heard that one of them started a charity recently. I mean, they might worship multiple gods, but they're nice enough.

It's been really inconvenient how big, how many people would be worshipping Yahweh right now in our temple if we had just compromised. And haven't you felt that pull too as a Christian to just compromise? It's so much more convenient to compromise. It's so inconvenient and difficult to hold your ground. It's much easier to just go with whatever is happening around you. If only I compromised on the Lord's Day, my life would be so much easier. I could get more done in my life, so you think. Or others around me wouldn't think I was such a stuck-up person because I'm holding to the Lord's Day, that it's the fourth commandment and it's binding. You feel that pull. I don't want to hold to this. I don't want to be uncompromising.

It'd be so much easier if I just lived like everyone else. If only I changed the worship style. Man, how many people could come worship God if we just compromised on our worship? If we just went with something that was a bit more in vogue. If only I told my friends what they wanted to hear all the time, my life would be so much easier. Be more convenient, I might even be happier. In a thousand subtle ways, the voice to just compromise comes to the ears of the believer every day. And all these subtle ways, just give in, it's just gonna be easier.

Why am I holding on to these convictions? Over 16 long years, perhaps they had those types of thoughts in varying ways if we had just compromised. So what did they do wrong? Why did they have to wait 16 years because they didn't compromise? What did they do wrong? Where did they go wrong in the text? And that's the hard truth. They didn't go wrong. They did exactly what they ought to have done. They were obedient to God's revealed will in verses 1 through 3. And the result was that their life was harder.

The result is that the rebuilding of the temple was put on hold. And that's a truth that is still with us today. That many times because you don't compromise, because you are trying to follow the Lord faithfully, your life in some respects doesn't get easier. Sometimes it actually gets harder. And while it's not what we want to hear in our flesh, better to know that that is the case so that you can be prepared. There could be challenges that you face right now as grandparents, as parents, as children, whatever it may be. And one of the reasons it's so difficult, not that you've lived perfectly, but it's because you have tried to live faithfully. And things are hard because you wouldn't give in, because you did try to live for the Lord. And so it's this way in the life of the Christian today, just as it was in the life of these believers in Christ, in Ezra 4.

Then you see, thirdly, the dogged opposition. So we've seen that covert opposition in the first three verses, that more overt, direct opposition in verses four and five, and now we see this dogged, persistent opposition in verses six through 24. As we come to verses six through 24, this is where the text is not completely chronological at every point.

So, Verse 5 mentions that Darius was king. That things were put on hold until Darius was king. Then, verse 6 moves to Ahasuerus. He's the next king, so that's still chronologically good. So you've got Darius and Ahasuerus in verse 6. And then Artaxerxes, which is the next king, in verse 7 through 23, chronological. So Darius, Ahasuerus, and Artaxerxes. But then, verse 24 goes back to Darius, the guy who was the king back in verse 5.

So it moves up something like, I'm not great with math, something like 70-ish years, and then it goes right back to 70 years previous. So we move up for a long ways into history, and then we go back. And the reason is because the author is showing this dogged opposition. He is showing that this sort of opposition continued, and then he sort of, by divine inspiration, there's no accidents here, but it's sort of as if he remembered, oh, I'm still back in 520-ish with Darius. Let me get back to where I was. He sort of traces this out, and then he goes back to Darius again. So that's sort of the scope of what's before us in verses 6 through 24. But you see, again, this dogged opposition. Verse six mentions Ahasuerus. Well, let's just read it.

And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. So they write an accusation against the inhabitants of Jerusalem. What did that accusation say? We don't know. All we know is they write some accusation, and apparently it was effective.

Then, after, Ahasuerus, it moves to Artaxerxes in verses 7 through 23. In this section, you essentially have two letters being written. One letter is written from some men who live in Jerusalem who are opposed to God and to his people. They write a letter to Artaxerxes and they say, in essence, this. Artaxerxes, we've observed that The people of Jerusalem are rebuilding their wall.

And we just thought you would want to know that they're a wicked people. We also thought you would want to know that if they rebuild their wall, they're going to stop giving money to the king, stop paying their taxes. You also might want to know that they were rebellious and hurtful people, verse 15. Do with this information what you want, but we just thought it would be good that you, the king, know these things. Of course, they're out to get God's people. And then the king responds, and you can read his response in verse 17 through 22. The king responds and essentially says, I've heard your complaints and your concerns.

I agree with your assessment. Go ahead and make them stop this work as soon as possible. Don't let them rebuild the wall. If you remember, all that rebuilding of the wall stuff takes place in Nehemiah. But that's the context here. You think, don't let them rebuild that wall.

This is dogged opposition, committed, persistent opposition. And the simple takeaway then for you here this evening is that you would be on watch, you would be on guard because there's going to be dogged opposition in your life. There's going to be persistent opposition to you and your faith in your own walk with the Lord. There's going to be that daily opposition trying to keep you from walking in the ways of Christ. And you're going to feel those temptations and those pulls every day of your life until glory.

It's going to be persistent and happen again and again. So press on. One commentary ended his chapter on this chapter of Ezra 4 and he said this. I thought this was helpful. The Christian does not spend his life on a playground, but rather on a battlefield. Christian does not spend his life on a playground, but rather on a battlefield. And that's really a great summary of this whole chapter. It's telling you that your Christian life is not going to be spent on a playground, it's gonna be spent on a battlefield. But there is one verse that we haven't really considered, and that's the final verse of the chapter.

Why does he move back to Darius in this final verse, verse 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. Why does he move back to Darius You could really view verse 6 through 23 as a giant parentheses. It's really not inaccurate. That's sort of what's happening here.

Five, he's talking about Darius, and then he jumps right back to him in verse 24. Why does he jump back to Darius at the end of the chapter? And it's because while this chapter is focused on the covert, overt, and dogged opposition that God's people face, it concludes in this chapter, verse 24, with this reminder that God was still faithful to his people, that they did actually eventually get to start rebuilding that temple. And that was in the second year of Darius, king of Persia, that in the end, despite all the opposition, the church is victorious.

Because Christ is victorious. All of this opposition that you see here in the text points you forward to the opposition that Christ would face for his church. Because you see, Christ would face covert opposition, and overt opposition, and dogged opposition. And he would die on a cross for the sins of his people. and he would spend three days in a tomb. But then he would rise victorious from the grave for the salvation of his people so that his church would be victorious in the end. And you who are in Christ face the same sort of opposition he did. You too face this covert, overt, and dogged opposition. But you face it, why? Because you were united to Christ. You face it as a result of being united to your head, the Lord Jesus Christ. And so you don't get to expect anything different.

But I ask you this, would you rather live your life in a playground and go to hell, or a battleground and go to heaven? If you're in Christ this evening, You get to live your life in a battleground, but you get to go to glory because you're in Christ Jesus.

He is your Savior. He is your Lord. He is the one who paid the penalty that your sins deserve. He rose from the tomb for you. He is coming again to rescue you. But your life is a battleground, but far better to have a life that is a battleground that ends in glory than a life that is a playground that ends in hell.

Let us pray. Dear Heavenly Father, we do thank you and praise you that we get to be in the battle. Oh Lord, blessed is the man who gets to fight in the Lord's army. Oh Lord God, we all long at times, and it's not all wrong to long for ease. We look forward to the day when it will be easy, when our sins will be totally gone and their persistence in our life. Our continued besetting sins that we find ourselves in and we hate and we're grieved by them Yet they arise again and again. Oh, Lord, we we look forward to that day when they are gone, when all of our difficulties and sorrows and tears are wiped away.

But Father, you told us it would be a battleground and we praise you that we get to be fighting in that battle. Help us to fight, Lord. Help us to continue to remember that though there be this Covert and overt and dogged opposition, there is this glory, this promised victory that is ours already in Christ Jesus. That even now we get to be more than conquerors. Father, we forget this. Grant us the grace to remember it.

And to not think ourselves a people who aren't blessed. For we are blessed if we have Christ. For if we have Christ, we have all we need in this life and in that which is to come. Oh Lord, if there be any that we know, our friends, our family members who are on the playground, we pray that you would transfer them from the trinkets and gimmicks of this world, which will not last, into the kingdom of your beloved son, in whom there is redemption, the forgiveness of sins. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.