

Sermon – 02/11/2008 pm

Opposition

Study Text: Ezra 4

The children of God were glad to be freed from slavery in Egypt but still life was not always easy for them. They experienced hardship and opposition as they journeyed towards the Promised Land. Not long after crossing the Red sea the Amalekites launched an attack on them. As Moses prayed, Joshua and his small, poorly equipped army fought the Amalekites – and God gave them victory. Later on they were opposed by the armies of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. Knowing how Israel had defeated these kings Balak, king of Moab hired Balaam to put a curse on the Israelites.

The people God brought up out of Babylon to Jerusalem also experienced opposition in the work of restoring the temple and the holy city. In this chapter we see how this opposition arose and the different forms it took. In Nehemiah we will see even more tactics. From feigned cooperation to armed threats, the opposition was determined and indeed successful at times.

It was of course devil-inspired opposition. Plotting and scheming are characteristic of the devil's opposition to the people of God. Such opposition began in the Garden of Eden and will continue until the devil is finally cast into the lake of fire.

Offer Refused

The altar was rebuilt and the foundation of the temple laid. All was going well for the returned exiles. They worshipped the Lord with joy and gladness according to what was written in the Scriptures. But times of testing soon came, as they always do for God's people. In this world you will have tribulation.

God called his people through his servant Cyrus to return and rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. But he did not promise them an easy, trouble free life in Jerusalem. They would have to work hard; they would face opposition, disappointment and discouragement – but God's purpose and his promise remained unchanged.

Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin ... (4:1). These words set the scene for what follows. We must not forget this description of the people who heard that the Jews were rebuilding the temple and came to offer their help. The locals came to Zerubbabel like friends eager to help. But he rejected their offer. Why? Surely he could have used every pair of hands he could get hold of for this vast project. But they were enemies of Judah!

Who exactly were these people who came saying *let us build with you*. They had been brought to this land, probably the neighbouring province of Samaria, by the king of Assyria. When the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel not only did they scatter the Israelites but they brought in people from other places. These people brought their own gods but also learnt to worship the God of this land with the help of an Israelite priest. They did not turn from their gods but simply added the God of Israel to their collection of gods to worship. *They feared the Lord yet served their own gods according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away (II Kings 17:33).*

What did these people state as their reason for wanting to help? *We seek your God as you do and have sacrificed to him since the days of Esarrhadon king of Assyria who brought us here* (4:2). What they did not say was that they also sacrificed to other gods. Zerubbabel had already rejected the services of some priests who could not prove their identity from genealogical records. He was not about to let these non-Israelite people join in the task of building the holy temple of the Lord even if extra hands would have been helpful. With these hands came heads and hearts. The whole work could have been undermined by these polytheists – and would have been according to the opening words of this chapter.

Zerubbabel rejected their offer, giving as his reason that King Cyrus had decreed that they alone were to build the temple of the Lord (4:3). He left unspoken the real reason which was religious rather than political. Zerubbabel was not looking for trouble. He was not on a crusade to condemn the heathen but to build the house of God. His answer was firm and unequivocal but not offensive. He wanted to maintain peace with his neighbours but at the same time maintain separation from them.

There is no place for the church to be engaging in multi-faith worship. Jesus did not tell the Samaritan woman it was okay for her to worship on Mt Gerazim and for him to worship in Jerusalem. His question to her was 'do you know who you are worshipping'? 'Do you know that salvation is of the Jews', meaning that God sent his Son into this world as a Jew. Jesus said 'you must worship in spirit and truth'; you must worship according to the truth of Jesus as it is written and not according to your own imagination.

The apostle Paul continued to teach this same truth about worship. He would have done exactly what Zerubbabel did. *What agreement has the temple of God with Belial or Satan* (II Corinthians 6)? 'Be separate' says the Lord. This principle is rightly applied to marriage as well as to worship. *Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers* (II Corinthians 6:14).

Opposition to the Temple

The enemies would not be put off so easily. Their offer to help was revealed for what it was when it was rejected. They went away plotting other ways to stop the people of God building the temple and worshipping God. The people of the land set out to *discourage the people of Judah* (4:4). They troubled them as they continued to build, hiring advisors to help them frustrate the work (4:5).

We are not given the details of this opposition but can imagine what they did from the way Balaam was hired to curse Israel. We don't have to imagine a great deal because we see this type of opposition today. The media is very good at digging up dirt and throwing it at the church and its leaders, sometimes in collusion with some disgruntled former member of the church.

There was no let up in this opposition. It continued all during the reign of Cyrus and into the reign of Darius (4:5). Not only did it continue; it was successful. Look ahead to verse 24 where we read that the work on the temple ceased until the second year of Darius – that was 16 years after the foundation was laid. God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to stir up the people to go back to the work of rebuilding the temple.

Opposition to Building the City Walls

In the reign of Ahasuerus/Xerxes ... in the days of Artaxerxes (4:6, 7). These two kings came after Darius. The writer leaps ahead in history telling how the people experienced more

opposition. He then comes back to Darius in verse 24, making the section from verse 6-23 a diversion which should logically be put in brackets.

Why this historical disjunction? There are critics who say that the writer was confused and did not know his history. But the reason for this digression can easily be explained. It was simply that the writer was continuing the theme of opposition. He did not have documents to refer to regarding opposition to rebuilding the temple but he did have documentary evidence of later opposition.

Ahasuerus/Xerxes was the king who Esther married. The enemies wrote to him making accusations against the Israelites, but again no details are given (4:6). Then in the reign of Artaxerxes they wrote again to the king of Persia. This time some names are included but no other details (4:7).

A second letter of accusation was written during the reign of Artaxerxes. This letter was accessible to the writer of Ezra and he quotes it in full – and in the Aramaic script in which it was written. Ezra and Nehemiah both returned during the reign of Artaxerxes so this letter was written closer to their time of leadership.

This letter was the work of Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe who belonged to the people forcibly resettled ‘beyond the River (Euphrates)’ and in the cities of Samaria by the Assyrians. They refer to the noble Osnapper, otherwise known in history as Ashurbanipal, who succeeded Esarhaddon as king of Assyria in 669BC (4:9, 10).

The letter was a complaint against the Jews who were rebuilding the city walls – note it is the walls not the temple they were rebuilding (4:12). They called Jerusalem a rebellious and evil city and warned the king that these Jews would not pay him taxes once the city was rebuilt. What God calls the ‘holy city’ his enemies call the ‘evil city’. After some flattery and this unfounded accusation about paying taxes they asked the king to make a search of the royal records (4:15). A letter inspired by the devil is not complete without a note of exaggeration which we find in their warning that this party of Jewish exiles will usurp his whole dominion west of the Euphrates.

The king made the search in what must have been very old records and agreed with their charge of rebellion. Why he did not find the edict of Cyrus in more recent records is a mystery. Thankfully Artaxerxes did not make a binding edict of the ‘Medes and Persians’ type but simply commanded that the work stop until *the command is given by me* (4:21). So the work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem was forcibly stopped. Rehum *by force of arms made them cease* (4:23). Incidentally, this letter may explain Nehemiah’s concern in approaching Artaxerxes in Nehemiah 1.

In closing, remember that God’s people will experience opposition whenever the earth remains. This opposition will be concerted and calculated. It will range from offers to help, to violent attacks. It will come from without and from within. Zerubbabel kept the enemies on the outer by rejecting their offer of help. Nehemiah will later face enemies within. We must remain alert. We must stand firm and fight the enemy, not as the world fights, not with the weapons of this world but with the weapons God supplies.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon