

When Faith Is Opposed

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[0 : 00] Let's pray.

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Let's pray. This is a copy of the letter that they sent.

[3 : 34] Let 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 a copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rahum and Shimshay and 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 of the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

May God add a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated? One of the most difficult parts of the Christian life is the fact that by becoming a disciple of Jesus, it does not make you immune to trials and tribulations.

Jesus made that clear in Matthew 16, 24 through 25. Jesus told his disciples, if anyone, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[4 : 58] For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Jesus also made it clear that following him puts us in opposition with unbelievers.

In John 15, 18 through 21, Jesus said, If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own.

But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, a servant is not greater than his master.

If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

The Bible tells us that trials, tribulations, and opposition that we face following Jesus is for our benefit.

[6 : 05] Romans 8, 29 reminds us that God works all things, all things, including trials, tribulations, and opposition together for our good, for the good of those who love him.

He uses trials to conform us, to make us more like Jesus Christ, his son. 1 Peter 1, 6 through 7 talks about that.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Trials, tribulations, and opposition develop Christ-likeness and godly character within us.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans 5, 3 through 5, Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

[7 : 28] Because trials, tribulations, and opposition are used for our sanctification to make us more like Jesus and develop godly character within us, the Bible says that we are to rejoice when we face them.

James 1, 2 through 4, And then he says in verse 12, Trials, tribulations, and opposition come with both a purpose and a reward.

But I wonder, how often do we, how often do you, count it all joy when you face trials of various kinds?

It's much easier to read these passages and agree with them when you aren't facing trials, tribulations, and opposition than when you are.

You know, the message of the prosperity gospel is enticing because it promotes a life free of suffering, doesn't it? It promotes really the same message that Satan tried to tempt Jesus with in the wilderness, material prosperity without suffering a cross.

[9 : 20] I think sometimes, if not a lot of times, when we suffer trials, tribulations, and opposition, we regard them with attitudes that are more informed by the prosperity gospel than by biblical Christianity.

When trials, tribulations, and opposition come into our lives, often our first thought isn't, Lord, thank you.

Thank you for this trial. Thank you for this tribulation. Thank you for this opposition. I am looking forward to this opportunity for you to test my faith.

We also, I would say, when life is going well for us, don't stop and think, you know what, Lord, what I really need right now is a trial or some kind of opposition.

No, when trials, tribulations, and opposition come into our lives, we are more likely to say something like this. Why God? Why me?

[10 : 38] I've been good. I've been faithful. How could you let this happen to me? In our flesh, we are tempted to see trials, tribulations, and opposition as intrusions into our Christian lives instead of instruments.

That God uses to shape us into the image of Jesus. You know, if someone asked me to share about the moments in my life that were the most formative to my faith, most of those stories, and I'm sure your stories as well, would include suffering through trials, tribulations, and opposition.

I know that God uses testing to mature our faith and to strengthen it through those moments of trials, tribulations, and opposition.

And again, I'm sure that you can say the same. But in my flesh, I confess to you that I do wish every day was a Friday.

Wouldn't that be nice? Who likes Monday? I want things to be easy. Don't you? But God doesn't call us to what is easy.

[12 : 01] He calls us to be faithful. Have you ever wondered why God put the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden? After God created Adam, he gave him a job to work it and to keep it, to work the soil, to get his hands dirty, and to guard the terrain.

Eden at that time had no marring, no pollution from sin, but this did not mean that Eden was perfect in the sense that it was impenetrable by evil.

In fact, Adam was warned of that very possibility of God. He was warned of falling away from God, his creator. As Genesis 2, 16 through 17 explains, Eden was a paradise, but Eden faced a real danger.

Even before the snake slithered in, it was the danger of Adam's heart wandering from God in disobedience and eating the fruit of the forbidden tree.

And so what the forbidden tree teaches us is that from the start, from the very beginning, God has sought faithfulness on the part of his people through testing.

[13 : 49] Will we obey his instruction even when, or especially when, we don't feel like doing that? From that point in Scripture onward, we see God's people face trials, tribulations, and opposition that test their faith.

Moments where God seeks his people's faithfulness and he does so through testing. And that's the case in Ezra chapter 4.

It's important to understand that this chapter is not arranged chronologically, but thematically. The first three chapters of Ezra focus on events that took place when the Jews first returned to Jerusalem shortly after 539 B.C.

Chapter 4, verses 1 through 5 summarizes the opposition that that group faced at that time. In Ezra chapter 4, 6 through 23, Ezra addresses another example of opposition from a later time when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls.

So chapter 4, verses 1 through 23 covers close to a hundred-year period of time. Then after addressing the opposition the Jews faced in Nehemiah's time, Ezra then circles back and in verse

24, he returns to the earlier date when the opposition put a stop to the rebuilding of the temple.

[15 : 26] And so when we read these verses, we understand, we see clearly that the theme of this chapter is opposition. Ezra arranged this chapter in this way to encourage the Jewish people who were living in his time.

He connects the opposition that their ancestors faced when they first returned and began to rebuild the temple. And he connects it to the opposition that his people were presently facing in rebuilding the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

He's tying these two events together to encourage his generation to trust in God and to be faithful to pursue his will.

He's making the point that just as those who opposed God's will to rebuild the temple in the past were defeated, so the present opposition his people faced in rebuilding the walls of the city would be defeated by God too.

As was the case for God's people in Ezra, such is the case for God's people today.

[16 : 43] We face opposition. The main idea for this morning's sermon is that those who are faithful to the Lord face opposition from the world.

Those who are faithful to the Lord face opposition from the world. And our text today provides us with two principles that help us understand why those who are faithful to God face opposition from the world.

So why does this matter? Well, Jesus said, again in Matthew 12, 30, whoever is not with me is against me and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

So you are either with Jesus or not. And if not, then you're against him. And if you are with Jesus, he says that you will face opposition from the world which is ruled by Satan and is in rebellion against him.

James 4, 4 says, you adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

[18 : 00] Christian, you are in the world but you are not of the world. The Bible says that if you are in Christ, you will face opposition from the world.

It explains why that opposition comes and it encourages us to remain faithful, trust in God, and to endure it with joy because we know that in the end it's all going to be worth it.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that? When you face trials, tribulations, and opposition, do you blame God for them?

Do you act defeated by them? Or do you praise God in them, trusting that such things will be used by him for good, to strengthen, to mature your faith, to make you more like Jesus?

The Bible is clear. Those who are faithful to the Lord face opposition from the world. It will happen. And our text today helps us understand why.

[19 : 10] And in understanding why we face opposition, we are equipped to remain faithful to God when opposition comes.

So again, two principles that help us understand why those who are faithful to the Lord faced opposition. The first principle is this. The world sees faithfulness to God as rebellion.

The world sees faithfulness to God as rebellion. verse 6. And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Now the Hebrew word for accusation here is related to the Hebrew word for Satan, the accuser. As Ezra continues recounting the original opposition the returnees faced from the Samaritans when rebuilding the temple, we see behind the scenes, behind these accusations is the ultimate accuser who works tirelessly to oppose God and all those who are faithful to obey Him.

In verses 7 through 8, Ezra connects that first attempt to thwart God's will for His people with another letter that was sent decades later to a different Persian king.

[20 : 33] And he writes about that letter in verses 7 through 8. In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithridash and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia.

The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. Rahim the commander and Shimshay the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows. And then in verses 9 through 10, we see the devious tactics used by those who were opposed to the Jews.

Look at verse 9 again. Rahim the commander, Shimshay the scribe and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Elam, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar, and he

was not great or noble by the way, deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province beyond the river.

Can you read between the lines here and see what tactic they are using? They're stacking the deck, aren't they? They've recruited the rich, the powerful, the influential on their side.

They're already planting the thought in Artaxerxes' mind that he is going to want to be with them or else he risked losing the support of the cool kids, the powerful people.

[22 : 08] It's interesting to me that all these people, despite their differences and their were differences, were able to put all of those things aside to unite together to attack God's people.

people. It's tragic that later, the Jews, who faced this tactic so many times in their history, used it against their Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees, the religious leaders of the Jews, were at odds with one another, big time, on theology, on politics, yet they united in their hatred of Jesus and they recruited the help of the Romans, whom they reviled and whom they despised, Gentiles, and they united with them to orchestrate his crucifixion.

So it should come as no surprise to God's people today, those who follow his Son and obey his word, that the world, despite their many, many differences with one another, will rally together against Christians and see Christians as the problem.

More on that in a minute. But I think there's a warning for us to heed here as well, and that is using the same tactic. Strength in numbers, stacking the deck, and using that tactic in our churches.

[23 : 43] Now the numbers of those who oppose the Jews in this letter, they appear to be real. But oftentimes in the church you'll hear someone use this same tactic, insinuating that they have the same numbers to move people to their side of an issue when they really don't have those numbers.

For example, you might hear someone use the phrase, you know, people are saying, you know, people are saying, I've heard people, and they're saying this.

Or they might say something like, and I'm not the only one, and I want you to know, I'm not the only one who has this problem or this concern or this issue.

Next time someone uses that tactic on you, ask them, well, what people? Who are these people? Give me their names so that I can talk to them and you'll probably find it's just a few people and they're probably all related to one another.

And we love them, but we can't use tactics like that. That's not an effective way to do God's work.

But more to the point, if you are with God, if you are on the right as informed by His Word, it doesn't matter how big the numbers of the opposition is.

[25 : 11] You understand that? It doesn't matter. You have the whole world because we know that God will have His way in the end. God wins.

He's already won. Back to the letter. They've used the tactic of their perceived strength in numbers, having recruited the wealthy, the influential, the intelligent to their side to entice Artaxerxes to join them.

And now in verse 12, they get more to the point. To the king, your servants, the men of the province beyond the rivers and 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.

So here we see it. The favorite tactic that the world uses, I think, in opposition to those who are faithful to the Lord, and that's accusing God's people of the very wickedness they commit themselves.

[26 : 24] All the Jews, all they're trying to do is to obey God to go back to the city that he's given them to worship in the land he gave to them to rebuild the temple, to rebuild the walls.

They had received permission to do this so they could worship God and Satan can't stand it. I remember being in seventh grade and maybe I've shared this story with you before, but in seventh grade we did something that schools still do today and they call it See You at the Pole.

And so what you do as Christians in the school, they gather together at the flagpole outside of their school and they circle around and oftentimes there's youth pastors, pastors there, and what you do is you pray for the school.

You pray for the students. You pray for the teachers. You ask for God's blessing and protection and for their salvation. And so this was my first See You at the Pole.

My sisters were older. They always got to go to See You at the Pole and now I had a chance to do that. And so we went and I was a part of that and that's what we did. We prayed for God to protect our school.

[27 : 48] We prayed for God to bless our classmates and our teachers. Then I went to my first hour class and I remember some students were talking about Did you see those people out of the pole?

Yeah, I think they're Christians. What are they doing? They worshipping the flagpole? How weird. What's wrong with them? And you know, I kind of had my head down and then all of a sudden one of my classmates said, Mike, you were there.

You were one of them. What were you doing? That was so weird. What are you guys worshipping the flagpole for? And that was hard for me.

I'd never encountered that kind of opposition before. And sad to say, they succeeded in making me feel ashamed. This is what the world does.

They try to make us feel ashamed for what we know is right and what we know is good and what we know is true. Isaiah 520 says, Woe to those who call evil good and good evil who put darkness for light and light for darkness who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

[29 : 17] And you know what's tragic about that passage is that those words were written to God's people and ultimately it resulted in their exile which they were returning from in Ezra.

So again, as Christians, we must be aware of falling for this tactic. Thinking we can win the world by being like the world.

That has never worked and it's never going to work. To deny or twist Scripture so that it doesn't offend the world is to deny the truth and it's to exchange it for a lie.

Apart from God and His Word, our value systems become jumbled. We will begin to confuse sweetness and bitterness, light and darkness, good and evil.

Paul warned Timothy about his need to stand against such opposition. In 2 Timothy 3, 1 through 5. But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.

[30 : 23] And this is scary. See if it does not describe our days. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness but denying its power.

and he says, avoid such people. Jesus said in John 3, 20, for everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his work should be exposed.

We live in a culture that celebrates abortion more than it celebrates being a mother. I know I talked about the Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker last Sunday and he continues to be made in the, you know, he continues to be in the news for giving a commencement speech at a Catholic college and I encourage you to listen to that speech if you haven't already.

What is he doing? He encourages couples to get married. He praises his wife for wanting to be a mother to his children, for putting her children above herself and that was deemed controversial. His home address was posted on social media. Over 100,000 people signed a petition demanding that the Chiefs release him.

[32 : 32] the NFL issued a statement. The NFL issued a statement about Butker's views and distancing themselves from him saying that his views are not ones that they as an organization support.

On the other hand, you have a former Chiefs player who has been in trouble with the law for beating for beating his girlfriend who has 10 children through 5 different women and never once has the NFL issued any kind of statement about him or any other player who has been in similar kind of trouble.

So here you have a regular guy married to his wife, praises her as a mother and tells people, tells these students that you should be against killing babies and he's the bad guy according to our culture, according to our world, he's the bad guy.

You know, I'm already and I have been convinced for a long time that the Bible is the Word of God but the way our culture responds to those who stand up for what the Word of God says and the way they vehemently attack them for that only further convinces my belief that this Word is true.

As the Bible says, we've read it, it's going to happen and it happens. The world used this tactic against Jesus too. Remember, after the Sadducees and the Pharisees teamed up to arrest Jesus,

they marched him to Pontius Pilate and in John 18, 29 through 30 it says, so Pilate went outside to them and said, what accusation do you bring against this man?

[34 : 32] And they answered him, if this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him to you. And eventually, Pilate joined them in condemning Jesus, though he'd never done anything evil his entire sinless life, and though he was obviously innocent.

Continuing on in verse 13, they write, now be it known to the king that if the city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. Of course, that was not true, but that's the tactic they used, probably because it more so than any other would strike a chord with the king, like many corporations today.

Artaxerxes caved at the thought of the loss of revenue. They presented him with a slanted view of history, and once again they used fear by insinuating that the Jews had some kind of sinister ulterior motive to the work that they were doing in obedience to God.

Verses 14 through 16, now again in the letter, now because we eat the salt of the palace, and it's 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.

[35 : 59] 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 the city was laid waste. We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will have no possession in the province beyond the river.

And in reality, these returnees, they weren't soldiers. They didn't have the numbers, they didn't have the resources to accomplish any of the things that their opponents accused them of, nor was it their desire to do so.

But this is what the world, this is what opposition does to those who follow Jesus. They did it to Jesus himself. We read about that same tactic used against him in Luke 23, 2.

And they began to accuse him, saying, we have found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.

[37 : 15] Same tactic. Well, he's telling us not to obey Caesar, he's telling us to stop paying taxes. That's something that you're going to be troubled by, Pilate. So it's clear now, isn't it?

It should be. God's people faced opposition to their faithfulness back then. God's son faced opposition for his faithfulness to accomplish his mission, purchasing our salvation on the cross. And God's people will continue to be accused of things that aren't true simply for being faithful and obedient to him.

So we saw the first principle. Now here's the second. God seeks our faithfulness through opposition. God seeks our faithfulness through opposition.

In verses 17 through 23, Artaxerxes receives the letter. He issues a decree that the work must stop. Just as the rebuilding of the temple was ordered to stop nearly a century before, as Ezra mentions in verse 24.

[38 : 25] And so what Ezra is doing here is he is encouraging his generation to do better. He's encouraging his generation to do better, to be more faithful than the previous one who allowed that opposition to put an end to their work for 16 years.

When we get to chapter 5, we see the names of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah. These were men that God stirred the hearts of.

men who God said, go to my people and tell them to stop being lazy, to stop being self-centered, and to get to the work that I never told them to stop in the first place.

To tell them and remind them that they need to act based upon my word, based upon my promises. They need to re-examine their priorities and they need to stop living as defeated people, running from the opposition and trust in me, in God, as the one who is in full control of their circumstances and that God will bless their faithfulness.

And you know what? We need more people in the church like Haggai and Zechariah. We need to understand that those Satan lurks behind the scenes, he's behind the opposition.

[40 : 04] Satan cannot operate outside of God's plan. And sometimes, a lot of times, God presents us like Adam in the Garden of Eden with opposition that tests our faithfulness.

Hebrews 11, 6 says, and without faith, it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

William Bates said, God will try our faith before he satisfies our sight. He will try our faith before he satisfies our sight.

So, if you are facing a trial, a tribulation, some kind of opposition, you know as a Christian it's going to come.

You know that God will use it for your good. You know that you need to be faithful as you endure that. I want to share another quote with you from J.I.

[41 : 22] Packer and encourage you to do this. And if you'll ask these questions the way that he poses them, you'll understand and you'll be able to be more faithful through that opposition.

He says, if you ask, why is this or that happening, no light may come for the secret things belong to the Lord our God. But if you ask, how am I to serve and glorify God here and now where I am?

And if you ask in that way, there will always be an answer. So how should we adjust to what we've heard? Well, I think it's this, to remain faithful in the face of opposition, to remain faithful in the face of opposition.

Jesus told his disciples in John 16, 33, I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace.

In the world you will, not might, you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world.

[42 : 39] We see this community of returned exile struggling through opposition. opposition, Jesus had his fair share of opposition, as did the Apostle Paul and the church throughout its entire existence.

And the answer is to trust God and to remain faithful, to don't give in, to not give up, to stay surrendered to the Lord and do not fear this world.

You know, I want to be realistic here. I don't want to just be, well, that's just him, I remain faithful.

Okay, Pastor Mike, I can do that. I hope that you can, but look, it's hard when you're facing trials, tribulation, and opposition.

And thank God that he's given us his word. Thank God that he's given us his son. Thank God that he's given us his church. And in this place, in this community, we need to be for one another and loving one another.

[43 : 52] We need to be those who are there for each other whenever someone is facing a trial, whenever they are facing tribulation, whenever they are facing opposition, and remind them of what is true.

And I think you'll agree with me as well is that though you would like every day to be a Friday, though you would like there to always be smooth sailing, if you've walked with the Lord long enough and you've faced those really difficult things, you're thankful for them because you know it was through them that the Lord kept you and sustained you and revealed himself to you in ways that have strengthened your faith and your love for him.

so I want to close with a quote from Charles Spurgeon. He said, I have learned to kiss the waves that throw me up against the rock of ages.

Have you learned to kiss those waves? Maybe you have. So if you're facing those kinds of trials, tribulations, opposition, one, talk to someone in this church, two, remember that the Lord is faithful and he will keep you and he will preserve you until that day when he brings you home.

Kiss the waves that throw you up against the truth. Jesus Christ, the rock of ages, who gave his life to give us life. You'll make it.

[45 : 26] You'll make it because you're in Christ. Christ. And if you're not in Christ, I hope that today you've realized your need for him.

I'm going to pray in a moment. I'll be down here. Come and find me. There's nothing more I would like than to tell you more about Jesus and how wonderful he is. Let's pray. Lord, we are thankful for this truth that we've seen in your word today.

Lord, in many places, Old Testament, New Testament, Genesis through Revelation, we see this truth presented to us that as your followers, we're going to be hated by the world.

And in their hatred, Lord, they're going to oppose us. In their hatred, Lord, they are going to test us.

In their hatred, Lord, they are going to say things about us that will hurt our feelings and will potentially cause us to feel ashamed of the truth that you have given us and the truth that you have used to save us.

Lord, we're also thankful to know that we have a Savior who understands even more deeply what it's like to endure such opposition.

[46 : 50] And God, we know that you love us and you care about us and you know each one of us individually. You created us. God, I pray for those who are facing difficult times, difficult decisions, difficult people, that, Lord, you would turn their face to you, that you would remind them of the hope that they have in you, that you would remind them, Lord, of the truth in your word, and that, God, you would encourage them to be faithful, faithful, no matter what the cost might be, because you are worthy and you are worth it, and a day will come when we are with you eternally, and there will be no more trials, and there will be no more tribulation, and there will be no more opposition.

Until that time, Lord, strengthen us, that we would not feel defeated. Strengthen us, Lord, that we would not give in. Strengthen us, Lord, that we would continue to speak and be obedient to you, no matter what, because you are the way, the truth, and the life.

We thank you and we praise you for that. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. I'll see you next time.