

Adversaries  
Ezra 4:6-24

The people of God had good reason to be discouraged. They had left everything and come back to Jerusalem, but what had they found there? No comfort. No safety. They certainly didn't have any freedom, as the pagan Persians were still in charge. And even though the Persian King Cyrus had told them to rebuild the Temple, their adversaries continued to thwart them at every turn. They had to wonder why everything was so hard.

And maybe we do too. After all, we've made the switch to the EPC, but so many of our problems are the same as they were back in 2012. We still have way too many empty pews. We all have friends and loved ones who need to be involved in the Church, who need a deeper relationship with Christ. So, why is it still so hard to get people interested in Jesus?

And what about us as individuals? We've declared our allegiance to Christ. We've tried to do the right thing where it comes to our health, to our finances. We've tried to take care of our families. But the hits keep on coming, as we and our loved ones continue to wrestle with everything from bad habits to besetting sins, from loss of employment to loss of health, from sickness to grief, from discouragement to despair.

So, if God loves us, why does He let us go through all these hard times? Are the troubles in our lives somehow a sign that God isn't pleased with us? That's what the health-and-wealth gospel preaches, and it is astoundingly popular. Joel Osteen is the pastor of Lakewood church in Houston, which has over 50,000 members. He says, "God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us." He says, "It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It's God's will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt." Is he right? And if we believe this, what do we make of the troubles in our lives?

And how do we explain the opposition God's people faced as they tried to do something they knew good and well God wanted them to do? I mean, hadn't the prophet Isaiah spoken this word of God about King Cyrus? "He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, 'You shall be built,' and to the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'" So why was everything so hard?

Well, this passage doesn't purport to give a complete answer to such a complex question. But it does shed some rather sobering light on it: part of the reason that everything is so hard for the people of God is that we have real adversaries in both the spiritual and physical realms. And the sooner we recognize this and start to deal with it, the better off we will be.

Now, this isn't just me trying to be a gloomy Gus. For what did Jesus say in our responsive reading this morning? "Because you are not of the world, therefore the world hates you. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." And if today's passage proves nothing else, it shows that Jesus' words weren't just for His apostles – it turns out that God's people have been persecuted ever since the days when they were trying to rebuild the Temple – really ever since the days of Cain and Abel.

So if, as they say in computer parlance, opposition in the Christian life isn't so much a bug as it is a feature, it might be a good idea for us to know a little bit more about our adversaries – who they are and how they work. And today's passage has a lot to say about them.

Who are the adversaries of the people of God? Well, they tend to be well-connected. Rehum and Shimshai seem to have been important officials in the area, and were certainly known to the King. Verse 14 says that they ate the salt of the palace, which is a way of saying that they were dependent on the king – perhaps even drawing a salary from him, for the word salary comes from the ancient custom of paying soldiers in salt.

But in any event, they were obviously well-versed in the correct political forms of the day – their letter was composed in Aramaic, which was the international language of diplomacy. It also uses all the proper courtly language, complete with elaborate deference and customary flourishes. In short, those who are most opposed to the work of the Kingdom of God are often insiders, people familiar with the halls of power, people of sophistication and wealth, those who consider themselves to be the best people, “The Great and the Good.”

And for the most part, we Christians haven’t ever measured up to this worldly standard. Most of Jesus’ disciples were from Galilee, an area that was despised by the sophisticated and the pious alike. The disciples were a bunch of nobodies – fishermen at best and despised tax collectors at worst – not an insider among them. And although Jesus Himself was born into the lineage of David, Joseph’s particular branch of the family had fallen into obscurity. Jesus had grown up in a carpenter’s shop, not in the house of a priest or the hall of a king. Is it any wonder that He was despised and rejected by the influential and powerful? And is it any wonder that the same sorts of powerful, influential insiders continue to mock the Church today and sneer at its teachings?

So, how do these powerful, worldly people tend to persecute the Church? When we look at today’s passage, we find that their tactics really haven’t changed all that much. The list of all the different ethnic groups in verse 9 is an ancient way for the adversaries to insist that their position is widely held and is thus extremely popular. They thus imply that the people of God are a fringe group, made up of extremists. And the opponents of the Church still point to their penchant for pluralism as evidence of their urbanity and sophistication, even as they condemn Christians for being narrowminded and even bigoted when we cling to the exclusive claims of Christ and insist on following His Word in our lives.

But the opponents of Christ don’t just consider themselves to be the most influential and popular people, and they don’t just claim that the people of God are somehow fringe extremists. They also know how to appeal to the fears of the powerful. The essence of their accusation in verse 12 is that if the walls of the city were to be rebuilt, Jerusalem would once again become a powerful political opponent of the Persian Kings. And in verse 13, they say that the only reason the people of God want the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt is so they can stop paying taxes to the Persian empire.

Now, these claims were wildly overblown, at least at the time this passage describes. Sure, back in the days of David and Solomon Jerusalem had been the seat of a great power, but that was ancient history, well over 500 years earlier. Citing that sort of history as evidence of the hostility of the people of God would be like blaming modern Christians for the abuses of the Crusades, which ended with the reconquest of Spain at the time of Columbus.

And anyway, by the time described in today’s passage, even if the people of Jerusalem had been able to build walls to protect themselves from bandits, they had no soldiers they could use to rebel against the Persians, and no money to pay such an army anyway. But paranoia tends to accompany

great power, and politicians have always tended to believe these kinds of slanders, whether they are true or not.

For example, it didn't matter that Jesus Himself had said that people should render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. It didn't matter that Jesus had told Pilate directly that His kingdom was not of this world. Pilate still condemned Jesus to be crucified principally because of the claim that He was somehow setting Himself up as a king in opposition to Caesar.

And those who rule, and those who put their faith in government still find the existence of any alternate source of authority to be a threat, no matter how innocuous it might be. Why else does the communist regime in China persecute house churches? The communists claim to be atheists – they claim that all our beliefs about Jesus are just a bunch of hoey. But because these tiny house churches fail to register with the state, they must be destroyed.

So no, we shouldn't be surprised when modern governments insist that church buildings are actually public accommodations, and thus must be able to be used for any secular purpose. We shouldn't be surprised when modern governments issue rules that say pastors must not say anything about politics from the pulpit or their congregations will lose their tax-exempt status. Throughout history, wherever the Church is not subject to the state, the state has often believed the Church to be a threat.

But if we learn that the adversaries of God's people tend to be well-connected, and that they appeal to the fears of the powerful, the main thing we learn from this passage about them is that they don't ever stop. They don't ever give up. As we read in the first few verses of this chapter, their opposition began in the days of Cyrus, right after the exiles returned from Babylon and began to rebuild the Temple. But verses 5-7 show us that their hostility remained constant all through the reign of his successors: through the reign of Darius, and then through the reign of Xerxes (Ahasuerus), and then through the reign of Artaxerxes. That means that the adversaries of God's people kept up their opposition for the better part of 100 years, just in this passage alone.

For you see, the text of verses 6 through 23 actually comes out of chronological order in this book. It's not talking about how God's people trying to rebuild the Temple, but about a succeeding generation's attempt to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Our author has inserted this account of a much later opposition into the narrative here precisely to make this point: the adversaries of God's people don't ever give up.

And that's still true today, isn't it? Mohammed started killing Jews and Christians and threatening other people if they did not convert to Islam somewhere around 630 AD, and the ISIS thugs continue the same sorts of tactics in his name today. In 1843, Karl Marx denounced religion as the opium of the people. He said, "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness." All these years later, his ideological descendants continue to persecute Christians in China and Cuba and North Korea for the same reason.

And unfortunately, such persistent opposition to the Church is often effective. The return letter from Artaxerxes, found in verses 17-22, shows that the king took the adversaries' arguments seriously, and he directed that work on the walls of Jerusalem be stopped. Just so, as verse 24 returns to the story being told in the previous chapters, it says that the adversaries had been equally successful in causing the project of rebuilding the Temple to cease for a time, until the second year of the reign of Darius.

So, what can we learn from all this talk about the adversaries of God's people? We could easily become discouraged or fearful, but let's think again about why our author inserted this tale of opposition into the narrative at this point. Yes, God's people have enemies who are well-connected and powerful. And yes, these enemies are implacable and often effective in their opposition. But the fact that this passage isn't at the end of the book is the most important point of all. For if the adversaries of God's people have often been able to slow down the work of the Kingdom of God, they have not been able to bring it to an end. The good news is that in chapters five and six, we learn how the work on the Temple was resumed and eventually finished, in spite of the adversaries' best efforts to the contrary.

In the same way, Jesus told us in our responsive reading that "Because you are not of the world, therefore the world hates you. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." It is thus important for us to be on guard, to remember that the unbelieving world will always stand opposed to Christ and His Kingdom. You can't lay down your arms as long as you have armed enemies, and the first step in winning a battle is to realize that you are in the middle of one.

But if Christ promised that Christians would always have opposition, He also told us He would send us a Helper, the Spirit of truth, Who would help us witness to the world about Him. The good news is that if we are trusting Christ as Savior and submitting to Him as Lord, if we are on His side, then His Spirit lives within us. And in the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to stand firm in the face of whatever opposition to the Kingdom of God may come – will come. In the power of Christ, we can endure and press on.