**Ezra #3: Sparks Fly (Ezra 4:1-5:5)**

**PRAY**

In this fallen and broken world, stained by sin and hatred, the good times can't last forever
- All good birthday parties or holidays come to an end
- Weddings are followed by "for better *or worse*"—and sometimes much worse
- After a baby is born come sleepless nights, diapers... eventually kids can break your heart
- Graduations end and a long life of toil in the workforce commences
- Happy retirements mean growing old and frail... And ultimately, life is followed by death
  - The book of Job says: *"Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."*
  - At a campfire, you can't stop sparks from flying up... It's inevitable

So, no, sadly, the good times can't last forever
- In the show finale of *The Office*, Andy Bernard poignantly comments: *"I wish there was a way to know you were in the good old days before you've actually left them."*

Spiritually, it's often the same: We can get so excited to follow Jesus, but harsh realities set in:
- We come down from the mountaintop, and can't maintain a permanent spiritual high...
- Sin can still waylay us... Life is still remarkably hard... Suffering still hits us all...
- "And what is this? People don't like us? They may even *hate* us?"

This all leads to discouragement, if not cynicism... Our own personal pursuit of God often cools
- Our service to the Lord wanes or ceases... Our hearts may even feel like giving up
- What happened to all the good times with Jesus or the blessed life we were promised?

Please **TURN** with me to Ezra chapter 4 [page #391]
Where we will see God's people coming off an amazing time
- They had returned from exile... At long last, they were back in the Promised Land!
- They kept seeing prophecies fulfilled before their very eyes... God kept keeping his Word
- They rebuilt an altar, and then successfully raised the resources for their building project
- And once the foundation of the temple was laid, they had a huge worship service/party
- Even amidst mixed emotions, ch.3 ended with their joyful shouts being 'heard far away'

[tr] But then comes chapter 4... And Ezra 4 is basically a real-life illustration of 1 John 3:13:
- *"Do not be surprised, brothers [and sisters], that the world hates you."*

Put another way: **God's people doing God's work should expect opposition**
[r] We'll naturally provoke it, so God's people doing God's work should expect opposition
What do we do with this truth? How do we prepare to face opposition—or face it well?
- How should we react when the good times roll... right on down the mountain,
- crashing and burning in a cesspool of hardship and hostility? ...God's Word can help us

Right when things were going so well, the Jews attracted the wrong kind of attention:
**READ v.1-2**[1]... Aw, how nice of them! ...Well, not so fast... Not all was as it appears
- Notice how these new people on the scene were outed right away in v.1 as "adversaries"
  - They weren't friends, even if they tried to make it look like they were

Derek Kidner notes this was a not-so-happy turning point: *"From this point onwards right to the end of Nehemiah there is conflict. Nothing that is attempted for God will now go unchallenged."*

[tr] And through what happens here, I want to show you 3 key truths about facing opposition
We may be in a very different time and place than the world of Ezra
But our world, too, can be very hurtful, scary, and disheartening
The first thing we'll see is that if **God's people doing God's work should expect opposition,**

## We can be <u>frustrated</u> in our <u>holiness</u> (4:1-5)

[r] God's people doing God's work—hopefully that's us—can be frustrated in their holiness

Sometimes this frustrating hatred can even approach with a smile: **READ v.2b[2]**
What's the story there? Well, in 2 Kings 17, the 10 northern tribes of Israel were sent into exile
And it says there that the king of Assyria brought people from many different nations
And resettled them in the cities of Samaria there, instead of the people of Israel
However, it says these people groups didn't worship YHWH
So, true story: God sent an army of lions against them,
Until Assyria sent a Jewish priest back to teach them *'the law of the god of the land'*
The new Samaritans were happy to worship the Lord... right alongside their other gods
Thus, the land was filled with syncretism—a mixture of true and false religion
So that's what the Jews were returning home to

Which helps explain the way they responded, refusing this dubious offer: **READ v.3[3]**
Without knowing the backstory, this may've sounded hateful, discriminatory, or racist
It may still sound narrow or rude to us... Why didn't they want these people to help them?
Were their adversaries actually hoping to sabotage or undermine them? Very possibly
So the Jews may've just been calling their bluff: 'We know what you're up to...'
But more so: I believe the Jews were trying to maintain holiness in their mission
They saw first-hand what compromise had caused... They couldn't risk any of that
So when a group of likely-scheming religious pluralists showed up uninvited,
They flatly refused their help: **READ v.3b[4]**
They clearly weren't opposed, in general, to receiving help from foreigners or pagans
As ch.1-3 describe them being given and seeking out help from Persia & Lebanon
Also, later on in Ezra, we see them welcoming genuine foreign converts into the fold
But this situation was different... It was spiritually dangerous... They were right to refuse
And Cyrus' decree gave them a convenient out: **READ v.3c[5]**

Clearly, the returning exiles hadn't read *How to Make Friends and Influence People*
This seems politically stupid... Why seemingly provoke their neighbours' hostility?
The short answer is that purity (holiness) was more important than popularity or even peace
They needed to be absolutely loyal to the Lord, even if that cost them cultural cred
If they allowed their faith to be diluted by those around them, that would be disastrous
And if their idolatrous neighbours were allowed to help rebuild the temple,
They could claim a stake in the temple, and thus wield influence over it
That's what was at stake... As Jim Hamilton explains: *"If Israel allows these adversaries to build the temple, they might as well not build it at all."*

But how about us? Who do we feel is more important to please: our culture, or our Creator?
Do we ever feel a need to appease those around us, by softening what we say we believe?
Will we compromise our morals in order to maintain popular favour in society?

Or are we willing to forego some potential benefits, if it means being more faithful?
What are *you* willing to refuse, in order to pursue or preserve holiness in your heart?
A better-paying job? Fun nights out with friends? A good grade in a class?
The enjoyment of some movies or shows? A massively popular video game?
The world offers us so much if we will only compromise... But the bill always comes due
At the same time, it can cost us to choose holiness, too... Are we willing to pay that cost?
You may be mocked for your stance... You may even offend those around you
But as Dale Ralph Davis says: *"Sometimes God's people cannot pander or negotiate... There are times when narrowness and intolerance is the way to spell faithfulness, when conviction must trump compromise."*
Holiness can seem very frustrating at times... Hindering to your life... Yet it's always worth it

As a church community, we also have to be careful who we partner with
It's not wrong to partner with unbelievers for many different purposes
For example, it's not wrong to have a pagan plumber, or to assist a non-Christian charity, or to meet in a secular school, or to receive most government grants
But if any ministry cooperation risks spiritual contamination, we've got to turn it down
This is especially dangerous with organizations or churches that *appear* Christian,
But who have compromised the gospel or the Word of God

What's especially frustrating is that holiness very often doesn't pay off in the short-term
You can do and say all the right things, and it can still be interpreted as an offence,
And you can still end up hated... That's what happened here:
The Jews' pursuit of holiness led to nothing but trouble for them
**READ v.4-5[6]**... When their false charity was rebuffed, their hostility became blatant and ruthless
They did whatever they could to *"frustrate their purposes"*... They were relentless:
They kept trying to discourage the Jews, making it all seem not worth it
They kept frightening them, perhaps with physical intimidation or armed force
They kept hiring lobbyists to spread propaganda back in the courts of Persia
And they did this for years—it says they harassed them for the whole of Cyrus' 20-year reign
Even if they didn't stop them right away, they succeeded in making them afraid

This follows a biblical theme that runs cover-to-cover:
The seed of the woman stands opposed by the seed of the serpent
The gospel has always had adversaries... God's people have always had enemies
The relative peace and favour believers have enjoyed in the west in recent centuries
is a historical and geographical anomaly, not the norm
But there's a lot more hatred for Christians today, even here, than most would admit
It may be subtle and couched in a smile, or it may be unapologetically hostile
From schoolyard bullies, to online trolls, to disowning family members,
to lobbying for bills that curtail religious freedom, to governmental overreach
These can effectually make us fearful or hesitant in our mission, even if they shouldn't

We can be sad about this, but we shouldn't be shocked... We're following in our Saviour's steps,
Who was opposed all the way to a cruel execution on the cross
And he told his followers: *"You will be hated by all for my name's sake."* (Mark 13:13)

Friend, don't let a fear of opposition keep you from coming to Jesus today
In fact, you might need to recognize yourself in the opposition
He's the risen and returning King, and all who forever oppose him will pay the price
But before then, he offers to pay the price for us, through his blood that he shed,
turning us from God's enemies into God's friends... Won't you let him do that for you?

[tr] Now, reading Ezra 4 can be confusing, because after v.5, we get an unannounced time-jump
Before being wrenched back to the time of Zerubbabel at the end of the chapter
We can only tell it's a jump in time because it mentions 4 kings in rapid succession:
Cyrus, Darius, Ahasuerus, and Artaxerxes, whose reigns spanned 115 years
Like the Avengers' '5 years later', imagine this going, '50 years later' or '80 years later'
And when the scene switches, we find the same nefarious hostility carrying on!
If we jump ahead to Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, we see: **READ v.6**[7]
Then if we jump ahead to his son, Artaxerxes, what do we find? **READ v.7-8**[8]
So I wasn't kidding: the opposition was relentless... It even lasted decades
Picture it like a novel telling a story, but then there are copies of old letters inserted in the pages,
As historic evidence that this was just *the start* of their long-standing problems
Or in modern terms, vv.6-23 almost function like an appendix in a book does
"See Appendix A for some more examples of how this opposition continued"
So what's the lesson we learn from this appendix? It's the same big idea:
**God's people doing God's work should expect opposition**... And here we see that:

## We can be slandered and even stopped (4:6-24)

[r] God's people doing God's work can be slandered and/or even stopped in our work for him

With the changes in power, the Jews' opponents felt they may get a more favourable ruling now
**READ v.9-10**[9]... That's quite the team-up of powerful people, signing this Change.org petition
**READ v.11**[10]... As we'd expect, their letter was full of flattery, fawning, claims of deep loyalty, exaggerated accusations, elevated rhetoric, stereotyping, fear-mongering, and doomsaying
**READ v.12**[11]... So we're much closer to the days of Nehemiah here
**READ v.13**[12]... A potential loss of tax revenue would've certainly gotten his attention
**READ v.14a**[13]... Basically, they'd enjoyed the king's hospitality before, visiting his palace
So they were saying they were bound to him and indebted to look after his interests
**READ v.14b-16**[14]... 'If this goes on, you're bound to lose all power out west here!'

But talk about a load of slander! Some truths, mixed in with a bunch of lies
Like, we know how small and precarious the Jews' position actually was here
Yet these folks claim to know that the Jews would definitely practice tax evasion,
And wildly speculate that they could even stage a takeover of the entire province
Now, had Jerusalem indeed been a troublesome city to foreign powers? Somewhat, sure
God had repeatedly helped his people defeat their enemies over the years
But this poisoning of the well against them—especially in this case, when they were not plotting rebellion in the least—was good old-fashioned antisemitism
I mean, don't parts of this letter sound like they could've been written about Jews today?
Stereotyping and lumping them all together, accusing them of pure evil
No matter what you feel about the modern Israeli state—
they are able to make grave errors, and you are allowed to disagree with them—

Hating on Jews as a people group stands in a long line of ungodly evil
It's becoming fashionable again to heap hate on them, even as Christians... Don't do it

Yet all God's people are bound to face accusations of one kind or another... To be slandered
Jesus said, *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."* (Matthew 5:11), and tells us to rejoice in this
In 1 Corinthians 4:12-13, Paul talks about their dealing with this kind of treatment:
*"When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things."*

Our culture increasingly views faithful Christian living or beliefs as immoral wickedness
Like, would it be far-fetched to hear an op-ed, or a post online, say things like this today?
'We need to talk about these Christians for a minute. They're an outdated scourge on our progressive society. They clearly *hate* women, the LGBTQ+ community, Muslims, or anyone remotely different. They want to *force* women to carry fetuses to term. They want to *prevent* people from being their most authentic selves, driving many to self-harm. They want to *prevent* the merciful ending of others' suffering who want to die. Didn't Jesus preach love and acceptance? They're so unlike Jesus! Their book of fairy tales teaches them to not eat shellfish or wear polyester—that's stupid, and they're all picking-and-choosing hypocrites. They're a threat to our economy, mooching off taxpayers... Tax the churches already! To top it off, they keep brainwashing their spawn to be just as hateful as they are. They really need to be stopped.'

Now, how does that all make you feel? Does it make you want to rejoice, like Jesus told us to?
We must learn how to respond to slander like Jesus did,
Who was slandered more than we ever will be
So we need to learn to *endure*, in the Lord's strength
We need to learn to *entreat* opponents, not slandering or threatening in return
And we need to learn to *entrust* our cause to God, letting him be our Judge

Jim Hamilton: *"Don't fear doing things that the worldly might spin against you. They can spin everything against you... Follow Jesus, love people, trust God, and the truth will be vindicated."*

And here's the thing: That's not the only hate or slander we will find ourselves facing
In a passage about 'adversaries', remember the name Satan actually means 'Adversary'
One of the devil's main activities is lying... He is 'the father of lies'
And that includes slander... He is 'the accuser of the brethren'

So remember we do not wrestle against flesh and blood... Other people aren't our main enemy
But Satan will stir up people to slander us, when he doesn't do it himself
He will speak lies to our own hearts, which we need to fight with truth

*"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world."* (1 Peter 5:8-9)

Back in Ezra 4, in v.15, the letter claimed that
Jerusalem was laid waste because they'd rebelled against their rulers
While this was partially true, God's people knew the deeper reason
In the next chapter, they'll tell us: *"But because our fathers angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon..."* (5:12)

That's a truth we can tell people when we're slandered by them: "You think I'm a terrible person
But you don't know the half of it! I'm a far worse sinner than you're accusing me of
I may or may not have caused trouble for you, but I've sinned against the King of kings
I need his mercy and grace, as do you... Thankfully, Jesus offers that to us"

In v.17-20, the situation goes from bad to worse, as the king buys into the narrative being spun:
**READ v.17-20**[15]... In their historical annals, perhaps they unearthed records
of Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria, or Zedekiah's rebellion against Babylon
But how maddening is that? He bought the lies!
It's the flipside of what we saw in chapter 1, when God stirred up Cyrus to help his people
God can allow rulers to hinder his people and work as much as help them finish it
We may sometimes think that God being sovereign should make everything flow smoothly for us
That's simply not the case... God is still in control... He still has a plan
But sometimes he'd rather deepen our faith than accelerate our progress[16]

So the adversaries successfully play on Artaxerxes' insecurities, swaying him: **READ v.21-22**[17]
'You're right; they could really hurt me. So make them stop.'
This freshly empowers the villains: **READ v.23**[18]
The Jews must've tried to keep going, but they were made to stop, by force
God allowed his people not just to be slandered, but stopped entirely!
How's that for a sobering dose of realism!
Sometimes we may attempt great things for God, and get stopped in our tracks
Then, it's like the narrator says, between the lines, 'And that wasn't the first time this happened',
Abruptly rewinding back to our original timeline: **READ v.24**[19]
So the temple rebuild wasn't just hindered, it ground to a halt... For as long as 16 years
Imagine how hard—how disillusioning—this work stoppage must've been on the returned exiles
Compare the end of ch. 4 to the end of ch. 3... It's alarming how far they *haven't* gotten

Believers, are you prepared to potentially deal with that kind of disappointment?
Maybe devoting even years of your life to a mission or cause that seems to go nowhere?
Or what if this happens with any of our big endeavours as a church? Will we be OK?
I'll tell you who won't be surprised, nor phased: The Lord
We may face all kinds of personal or spiritual or ministry derailments
Which can make us wonder: What is God doing?!, and not get an answer
If or when we don't succeed, we may assume we did something wrong
But being stopped doesn't invalidate who you are, nor your mission
It's not a straight line from here to glory... Yet God's grace will be sufficient for us

[tr] Remember Jesus said: *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* (John 16:32-33)
We're given a little taste of this overcoming hope in Ezra's next words, in chapter 5
For while the derailment was long and hard, it was still temporary
And in his perfect time, God got them back on track
So, **God's people doing God's work should expect opposition**... but praise the Lord:

## We can be <u>strengthened</u> to <u>overcome</u> (5:1-5)

[r] God's people doing God's work can be strengthened to overcome opposition

How did he get them back on track? Using the prophetic word again: **READ v.1-2[20]**
Your homework assignment is to go read those prophets' two books in the Bible
Or back in June, I preached through Haggai, as a first portion of this Rebuild series
So you might recall these words to a then-procrastinating people: *"Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? ...Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord."* (1:4-8)
Remarkably, Haggai is one of very few prophets whose message was heeded and obeyed
And Ezra highlights, in v.2, how both he and Zechariah, were *with* the people, supporting them
So don't miss what this prophetic activity and assistance revealed:
They weren't alone! God hadn't abandoned them, when it felt as though he might have
God was still speaking to them... And in such, he was showing he was still over them

But just as the mission resumed, it was quickly threatened: **READ v.3-4[21]**... Sparks were flying!
'Who gives you the right to start building again? Do you have a permit?'
They then asked for names, presumably to be able to report or punish the troublemakers
We aren't told whether they answered them, or boldly defied their questions
Either way, these aren't the same fearful workers who'd been intimidated before
They'd been freshly strengthened for the task at hand and would not be dissuaded now

How so? **READ v.5[22]**... That 'but' there made all the difference in the world
*'But the eye of their God was on [them]'*... God was watching over them
They now trusted that, no matter the opposition, he would see them through
You may be discouraged today by the disappointments of life
The good times that have been cut short... The dreams that've gone unfulfilled
The godly ambitions that haven't seemed to go anywhere... The people who've hurt you
And you go: "How can we be strengthened today, to overcome these things? I need this!"
So do I! We need to listen to the Word of the Lord, and let it rebuild our hearts' trust
Hear his commands and obey him, even if you don't see the fruit
See how he has come through, at long last, for his people, time and time again
Their endurance through opposition was not inevitable, it was miraculous
Put your faith in his promises... Hope in him again: *"Behold, the eye of the LORD **is** on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love."* (Psalm 33:18)
Do you believe this, brother? Can you cling to this, sister?

**CONCLUSION**
Take heart... It might not at all feel like you have overcome the world today
And yet, if you have Christ living in you and watching over you, you *have* overcome
Don't be discouraged in your attempts to be holy like him... God sees
Don't despair when we are slandered or even stopped... God sees
And don't be duped by any adversary, including the devil, and give up hope... God sees
The fire may flare, the sparks may fly... But always remember:
The good times can't last forever... Until they will

**PRAY** **Benediction: prayer, <u>5min</u>,**

[1] 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 fathers' 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.”
[2] “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.”
[3] But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' 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 to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”
[4] You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God
[5] but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”
[6] 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.
[7] And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.
[8] In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows
[9] Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar [or as Pastor Troy wants me to pronounce it, O’Snapper] deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River.
[10] (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.
[11] 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.
[12] 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.
[13] Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonour,
[14] therefore we send and inform the king, in 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 kings 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.”
[15] The king sent an answer: “To Rehum 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.
[16] HT Reed
[17] Therefore 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?”
[18] Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.
[19] 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.
[20] Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.
[21] At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: “Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?” They also asked them this: “What are the names of the men who are building this building?”
[22] But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.