



Small Group Guide – October 1 & 4

The Return – Perseverance in the Midst of Difficulty

Date: October 1 & 4, 2026

Focus Passage(s): Ezra 4-6

Theme: Opposition does not mean God has stopped working. Persevere, do the next right thing, and trust God in the delay.

Suggested Schedule (60 minutes total)

Segment	Time	Description
Icebreaker	10 min	Get comfortable, begin connecting
Intro/Recap	5 min	Read the key passages for the week
Group Discussion	25 min	Dive into Scripture and discuss application
Deeper Dive Option	5–10 min	Deeper Bible study or individual challenge
Prayer & Requests	10–15 min	Close in prayer for growth + personal needs

Welcome + Icebreaker (10 min)

What is something you tried that turned out to be much harder than you expected?

When progress is slower than you expected, which is more natural for you: work harder, get frustrated, question the plan, take a break, or quit altogether? Why?

Key Message Recap

We usually expect doing the right thing to produce results. When it does not, discouragement can arrive quickly. We may even begin wondering whether the difficulty itself is evidence that we made the wrong decision.

Ezra 4-6 challenges that assumption. God's people were doing what God had called them to do, yet opposition still came. The people encounter discouragement, intimidation, political pressure, accusations, and eventually a forced stop to the rebuilding. What probably felt like momentum suddenly became a waiting season that lasted roughly fifteen to twenty years.
(continued)

That raises an important question for us: **What do we do when we believe we are following God, but everything becomes more difficult instead of easier?**

Ezra reminds us that difficulty is not automatic evidence that God is absent or that we are headed in the wrong direction. Sometimes God can be fully in something while that thing remains fully difficult.

Discussion Questions (25 min)

Read Ezra 4:1-5 and Ezra 5:3-5

The people experience opposition almost immediately after beginning the work God called them to do. What begins as an offer of assistance eventually becomes discouragement, fear, and intentional efforts to frustrate the rebuilding.

Later, another challenge comes under King Darius. This time, however, Ezra includes an important detail - "But because their God was watching over them, the leaders of the Jews were not prevented from building until a report was sent to Darius and he returned his decision."

The opposition was real, but so was God's presence.

Opening Question

Why are we sometimes quick to assume that difficulty means something has gone wrong?

Key Truth - Just because there is opposition doesn't mean things are going wrong.

Following God Can Bring Opposition

Read Ezra 4:1-5

At first, the opposition does not even look like opposition. The surrounding people offer to help rebuild the temple, claiming that they worship the same God. Zerubbabel and the other leaders recognize, however, that their worship is actually a mixture of beliefs and that this is not a shared mission.

Once the offer is rejected, the motives become clearer. Those same people begin discouraging the builders, frightening them, and actively working to frustrate their plans.

Opposition can sometimes be obvious, but it can also be subtle. That makes discernment important. At the same time, we should be careful not to label every inconvenience, disagreement, or difficulty as spiritual warfare. The point of Ezra is not that every problem is opposition. The point is that following God does not make us immune from it.

Discuss

- Why might we expect following God to make life easier?
- How can we distinguish between ordinary difficulty, consequences of our own choices, and genuine opposition?
- Why is wise counsel important when we are trying to determine whether we should continue or change direction?
- Have you ever encountered resistance while trying to make a healthy or God-honoring change?

Key Truth - Following God does not guarantee a resistance-free life.

A Delay Is Not Necessarily a Denial

Read Ezra 4:23-24

The rebuilding eventually comes to a standstill. This is not a delay of a few days or weeks. The people experience a long season in which the thing they returned to accomplish appears to have stopped.

Imagine how discouraging that must have been. They had already experienced seventy years of exile. They finally returned home, began rebuilding, and then found themselves waiting again.

We experience our own versions of this. A relationship finally begins improving and then another conflict happens. Someone makes meaningful progress in recovery and then experiences a setback. You begin reconnecting with church and something happens that reminds you why you pulled away in the first place. Slow progress can easily feel like no progress.

Discuss

- What makes waiting especially difficult after you have already taken a step of faith?
- When progress stops, what conclusions are you most tempted to make about yourself or God?
- How can we tell the difference between a season that requires perseverance and one in which God may actually be redirecting us?
- What helps you remain faithful when you cannot see progress?

Key Truth - A stalled season does not necessarily mean God has stopped working.

Don't Let Opposition Automatically Change Your Direction

The message gives an important caution: when things get difficult, do not immediately interpret the difficulty as a reason to quit.

That does not mean stubbornly continuing every plan we make. Our plans are not automatically God's plans. Sometimes God redirects us, refines our plans, changes our timing, or closes a door entirely.

Instead of reacting immediately, the message encourages us to stop, pray, seek wise counsel, and return to what God has actually asked us to do. The important question is not simply, **"Is this difficult?"** The better question is, **"Am I still being faithful to what God is asking of me?"**

Discuss

- Why can difficulty cause us to question things we once felt confident about?
- Which is harder for you: continuing when something is difficult or admitting when God may be redirecting you?
- What role should Scripture, prayer, wise counsel, and Christian community play in deciding whether to persevere?
- Is there something difficult in your life right now where you need clarity about whether to continue, adjust, or stop?

Key Truth - Difficulty should cause us to seek God, not automatically cause us to abandon the direction He has given.

Perseverance Is Usually More Ordinary Than We Think

The word "perseverance" can sound dramatic. We may picture heroic faith, enormous sacrifices, or someone accomplishing something extraordinary.

The message gives us a much more practical definition: "Perseverance is doing the next right thing when quitting would be easier."

Sometimes perseverance looks like opening your Bible when God feels distant. It may mean praying when nothing seems to be happening, showing up when you would rather disappear, asking for help again, or continuing a difficult conversation.

Perseverance is not pretending everything is fine. It is choosing faithfulness even when progress feels slow, invisible, or nonexistent.

Discuss

- How does this definition change the way you think about perseverance?
- What is the difference between perseverance and pretending you aren't discouraged?
- What might the "next right thing" be for you right now?

Key Truth - Perseverance is often ordinary faithfulness repeated over time.

God May Be Working Where You Cannot See

Read Ezra 5:3-5 and Ezra 6:6-12

When opposition rises again under Darius, the outcome changes dramatically. Officials question the rebuilding and send a report to the king, but the Jewish leaders continue their work while they wait for his response.

Darius searches the records and discovers Cyrus's original authorization. Suddenly, the challenge intended to threaten the project becomes part of the process God uses to provide for it. Darius not only permits the temple to be rebuilt, but also orders that royal resources help pay for the construction.

The message summarizes the moment this way - "God finishes what he starts, even when it looks like failure to us."

This does not mean God promises to complete every project or plan we begin. The sermon carefully makes that distinction. Our plans may need to change, but when God has promised something, opposition does not get the final word.

Discuss

- What do you imagine the Israelites thought God was doing during the years when construction had stopped?
- Have you ever recognized God's work only after looking back on a difficult season?
- Why is it dangerous to judge God's faithfulness only by what we can see right now?
- How can remembering God's past faithfulness strengthen us when His present work is difficult to see?

Key Truth - God can be working in ways we cannot yet see.

More Truth From the Gospels (10 min)

Ezra shows God's people encountering resistance while trying to faithfully accomplish what God had called them to do. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus never promised His followers a life without difficulty.

Instead, Jesus teaches His followers how to remain faithful when difficulty comes.

Jesus Was Honest About Trouble

Read John 16:33

Jesus prepares His disciples for what lies ahead. He does not tell them that following Him will remove every difficulty. He tells them that they will experience trouble, while also grounding their hope in Him.

This gives us an important perspective on Ezra. Opposition does not necessarily mean God has abandoned His people. Difficulty and God's presence can exist at the same time.

Foundational Truth - Jesus does not promise the absence of trouble. He promises that trouble does not have the final word.

Discuss

- Why is Jesus' honesty about difficulty important for our expectations of the Christian life?
 - How might unrealistic expectations about following Jesus make us more vulnerable to discouragement?
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Jesus Teaches Persistence in Prayer

Read Luke 18:1-8

Luke introduces Jesus' parable by explaining that Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that they should continue praying and not give up.

Persistent prayer does not mean forcing God to follow our timetable. It means continuing to trust and seek Him even when the answer seems delayed.

Foundational Truth - Waiting is not an invitation to stop praying. It can become a place where trust grows deeper.

Discuss

- What happens to our prayer lives when answers take longer than expected?
- Is there something you have become tired of praying about?

Jesus Calls Us to Faithfulness, Not Ease

Read Matthew 7:24-27

Jesus describes two people who build houses. Both experience storms. The difference is not that one person's obedience prevents the storm. The difference is the foundation underneath the house when the storm arrives.

Following Jesus does not mean avoiding every storm. It means building our lives on something that can remain firm when the storm comes.

Foundational Truth - Obedience does not remove every storm, but it gives us a foundation for enduring one.

Discuss Where do you most need to build your response on Jesus' words instead of your current circumstances?

Jesus Himself Persevered Through Opposition

The clearest picture of perseverance is Jesus Himself. Throughout the Gospels He encounters rejection, misunderstanding, betrayal, religious opposition, political pressure, suffering, and ultimately the cross.

Yet Jesus remains faithful to the mission the Father has given Him.

His perseverance also reminds us that Christianity is not simply advice about how to become more resilient. Our hope begins with what Jesus has already accomplished for us.

Foundational Truth - We persevere because Jesus first remained faithful for us.

Real-life Application (5 min)

Some seasons make God's work easy to see. Other seasons feel like Ezra 4. We have taken a step, tried to be faithful, and then watched everything slow down or become more difficult.

In those moments, discouragement can begin telling us a story. Maybe God is not working. Maybe none of this matters. Maybe we misunderstood. Maybe quitting would be easier.

Ezra reminds us that we cannot always determine what God is doing by looking only at the speed of our progress. Sometimes faith means trusting the One who is watching over us while we are still in the middle of the story.

Reflection Question Where are you most tempted to interpret difficulty or delay as evidence that God is not working?

Next Steps Challenge (5 min)

The message gives us three practical responses when opposition or discouragement comes.

First, **don't let opposition automatically change your direction.** Before quitting, stop and pray. Seek wise counsel and return to what God has actually asked you to do.

Second, **persevere in the delay.** You do not have to solve the entire situation this week. Ask what faithfulness looks like today. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is simply take the next right step.

Finally, **trust God when opposition comes.** You may not be able to see everything He is doing. Trust is not pretending you are not tired, disappointed, or confused. It is continuing to place your confidence in God while the outcome remains unfinished.

Personal Challenge What is the next right thing God may be asking you to do instead of quitting?

Prayer Time (10 min)

Perseverance-Focused Prayer

Begin by thanking God for the ways He has already been faithful. Ask Him to give wisdom to anyone who is unsure whether a difficult situation requires perseverance or a change of direction. Pray for people who are tired from waiting and for those who feel as though their progress has stopped.

Ask God for strength to do the next right thing rather than becoming overwhelmed by everything that remains unfinished. Pray for discernment when opposition comes and for confidence that God's presence is not measured by how easy our circumstances feel.

Finally, thank Jesus for His faithfulness through suffering, the cross, and resurrection. Ask Him to help the group become people who remain faithful because their hope is ultimately in Him.

Quiet Prayer

"Where am I tempted to quit because progress has been slower or harder than I expected?"

"God, what is the next right thing You want me to do?"

Optional Communion Moment

Ezra 6 ends with something more significant than the completion of a construction project.

Read Ezra 6:16 and Ezra 6:19

After the temple is completed and dedicated, the returned exiles celebrate Passover. Passover reminded God's people that He had rescued them before. Generations earlier, when Israel was enslaved in Egypt, God had acted to rescue them and had instructed His people to remember what He had done.

The message connects that remembrance directly to Jesus. On the night before the cross, Jesus shared Passover with His disciples and showed them that God's story of rescue was ultimately pointing toward Him.

Communion gives followers of Jesus a similar opportunity to remember. When we do not know what God is doing next, we can look back at what He has already done. The cross reminds us that God has acted decisively to rescue us from sin and death, and the resurrection reminds us that apparent defeat does not get the final word.

Before taking communion, consider a place where you are waiting, discouraged, or facing opposition.

Deeper Dive - Character Study

Nehemiah: Staying Faithful When the Work Is Opposed

Primary Scripture: Nehemiah 2:11-20; 4:1-23; 6:1-16

Overview

Nehemiah's story takes place after the events covered in this part of Ezra. The temple has been rebuilt, but Jerusalem's walls remain broken.

When Nehemiah learns about Jerusalem's condition, he grieves, prays, and eventually receives permission from the Persian king to return and help rebuild the walls.

Almost immediately, opposition appears.

Nehemiah encounters ridicule, threats, intimidation, distraction, and attempts to damage his reputation. Yet he continues seeking God, leading the people, and doing the work in front of him.

Key Moment 1: Nehemiah Prays Before He Acts

Read Nehemiah 1:4-11 and 2:4-5

Nehemiah's perseverance does not begin with determination. It begins with prayer.

Before he develops a strategy or begins rebuilding, he brings the situation before God. Even later, when the king unexpectedly asks what he wants, Nehemiah briefly prays before answering.

Discuss

- Why is prayer especially important before deciding how to respond to difficulty?
- What is the difference between asking God to bless our plans and genuinely asking Him to direct them?
- Where do you need clarity before simply pushing harder?

Key Truth - Biblical perseverance begins with dependence on God, not stubbornness.

Key Moment 2: Ridicule Does Not Stop the Work

Read Nehemiah 4:1-6

Sanballat and Tobiah ridicule the builders and question whether they are capable of finishing. Their words attack both the project and the people doing it.

Nehemiah responds by praying and continuing the work. Verse 6 says the people worked with enthusiasm and eventually rebuilt the wall to half its height.

Discuss

- Why can discouraging words be such powerful opposition?
- Which voices tend to become loudest in your mind when progress is difficult?
- How can prayer help us respond to criticism without becoming controlled by it?
- When have you needed to keep doing the next right thing even while someone questioned whether it mattered?

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Key Moment 3: Nehemiah Responds Wisely to Real Threats

Read Nehemiah 4:7-14

As opposition intensifies, Nehemiah does not simply say, "God will protect us," and ignore the danger. He prays and takes practical action. The people organize themselves, guard vulnerable areas, and continue working while remaining alert.

This gives us an important picture of biblical trust. Trusting God and making wise preparations are not opposites.

Discuss

- What do you notice about the combination of prayer and practical action?
- Why can perseverance sometimes require changing our method without changing our mission?
- How can wise boundaries, counseling, planning, or asking for help actually support perseverance?

Key Truth - Faithfulness can include both trusting God and responding wisely to what is happening around us.

Key Moment 4: Nehemiah Refuses Distraction

Read Nehemiah 6:1-9

As the wall nears completion, Nehemiah's opponents repeatedly try to lure him away from the work. He refuses.

His response communicates a simple idea: the work God has given him is too important to abandon for distractions designed to pull him away.

Discuss

- Why can distraction sometimes be more effective than direct opposition?
- What tends to pull your attention away from things you know matter?
- How do you decide which interruptions deserve your attention and which ones require a "no"?

Key Moment 5: The Work Is Finished

Read Nehemiah 6:15-16

The wall is eventually completed. Interestingly, even Nehemiah's enemies recognize that the work could not be explained merely by human effort. They realize God has been involved.

Like Ezra, the ending does not erase the difficulty that came before it. Instead, the finished work gives a different perspective on all the moments when opposition could have caused the people to quit.

Discuss

1. What similarities do you see between the opposition in Ezra and Nehemiah?
 2. Which form of opposition in Nehemiah's story would be most likely to discourage you: ridicule, threats, distraction, or false accusations?
 3. What can Nehemiah teach us about perseverance without becoming stubborn or reckless?
 4. What is the next right thing God may be asking you to do?
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Key Takeaways

Nehemiah's story shows that perseverance is not blind determination. He prays, seeks God's direction, makes practical adjustments, establishes wise protections, refuses unnecessary distractions, and continues the work God has given him.

His experience also reminds us that opposition can change forms. Sometimes it comes through discouragement, sometimes through fear, and sometimes through distraction. Faithfulness requires continuing to seek God rather than allowing the presence of difficulty to make our decisions for us.

Additional Scriptures for Further Study

James 1:2-4

James describes how endurance can develop through trials. This passage is best approached carefully, especially with someone experiencing fresh pain, rather than using it as a quick explanation for suffering.

Galatians 6:9

Paul encourages believers not to become tired of doing what is good simply because results are not immediate.

Romans 5:1-5

Paul connects suffering, endurance, character, and hope while grounding the entire process in God's love.