

TJW, HT, 01.February.09,

9.15am & 11am,

Ezra chapters 4-6

When you face opposition of some kind, what's your normal reaction? Do you naturally fight back, or do you run away?

You'll sometimes hear people talking about the two instincts - fight... or flight.

Some people are fighter - not happy unless they've just had a big argument with someone - while other people just want to flee from opposition.

For committed Christians, what do you most often do when you run into something that opposes you being faithful to Jesus Christ?

And let's be clear - that opposition can hit you from every angle, can't it.

It can hit from the outside - someone at home who wishes you weren't a Christian - someone at work who wants you to disobey Christ in order to fit in.

And opposition can hit you from the inside. In every Christian there is still in us what the Bible calls 'the sinful nature' - 'the old self' - the part of you that whispers in your ear: "You'll never be really satisfied, just by living to please Christ. You can go against his word - it'll feel really good, and Jesus won't mind too much."

When this kind of opposition hits you - either from the outside or the inside - what's your usual reaction? Fight it? Flee from it? Or just roll over and let it push you along?

This morning we come to a part of the Bible which is going to help us react to opposition the right way. In the book of Ezra, chapters 4, 5 & 6 are all about opposition, and what to do about it.

These chapters tell us about a time 500 years before Jesus was born. God's people in Israel are recovering from having been beaten in battle, and having their capital city, Jerusalem, destroyed. They're rebuilding their temple - and they're going to rebuild the walls of the city. And every step of the way - for fifty-odd years or so - somebody wants to stand in their way.

Do open the Bible up to Ezra chapter 4 - and even in the headings there you'll see that this is all about opposition.

Now here are the three ways to face opposition properly, that God gives us in these chapters:

Don't compromise / Trust the God who's in control / Trust the God who speaks.

In fact, these three things are really the three main lessons of this whole book of Ezra:

- Do not compromise your faith or your life. That becomes the big issue towards the end of Ezra.

- God is in control. God's sovereign power over everything in his world is where this book starts.

- And God speaks. We'll see next week how vital God's Word is, if God's people want to stick faithfully with him, and not wander off the path into the brambles.

So first: **1. Don't compromise.**

These people know that God has taught them a lesson, and they want to sort their lives out from now on.

First, they know that in the past God has punished them.

The governor of the region that Jerusalem starts to question them: "Who gave you permission to rebuild Jerusalem?". And so they tell him their story. See chapter 5, verse 11 [READ 5.11-12].

They know why their city was destroyed - God was behind it - and he did it because they had stopped listening to him and following what he said.

And now, in the present, they want to learn from those past mistakes. Turn back to the beginning of chapter 4 [READ 4.1-3].

You might think that they're behaving like a spoilt toddler here - turning down help just to be spiteful.

But actually what they do here is wise. Verse 1 tells us that these people were their enemies - so this is not a genuine offer of help. It's more devious than that.

To see what these people were really up to, turn back a few pages to 2 Kings 17. This describes these same people who offered to help with the rebuilding, saying: "We worship the same God as you!". See verse 33 [READ verses 33-34].

So the Israelites have learned their lesson. They know that God has said: "Worship me and me only - because I am the one true God."

They know that when they stopped believing that in the past it got them into trouble.

And they know that these other people don't really want to worship God alone. They just want to add God to their collection of gods - like a kid in the school playground wanting to collect as many football cards as possible, so he can have the most impressive collection - or like someone who takes out lots of different life assurance policies, because there's no one policy that they really trust.

They've learned their lesson from their past compromises. They're putting it right in the present. And they also know what kind of future they want. Back in Ezra chapter 6. By now they've finished rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, and they're celebrating - see verse 19 of chapter 6 [READ 6.19-21].

They're going to be people who are 'clean' - that is, people who are morally and spiritually different from the people around them.

There's nothing nationalistic or racist about this - because it says here, doesn't it, that anyone - whatever their race or nationality - could join them - if they were willing to give up worshipping gods that don't exist, and instead worship and obey the one true God.

(This is a little foretaste of what would happen when Jesus came, and his message went out to the whole world.)

So, God has taught them hard lessons in the past about not compromising their faith and their life - and they're now serious about learning those lessons in the present - and sticking with them in the future.

I reckon that this rings lots of bells with us, too. We are also under pressure to compromise our belief and our faith.

There are pressures on our faith from the outside.

We live in an age which is getting slowly more spiritual - but it's also a time where people do not want to hear that Jesus Christ alone is the way to God, and the truth about God.

I have to tell you that the idea that everyone, whatever their religion, must come to Jesus Christ in order to know God the Father, is not a popular one in our Anglican diocese of Leicester.

And if you say that kind of thing in public you'll often be told you're intolerant - a fundamentalist.

But we cannot compromise on this, because in the Bible God never does. There is one God, who is the Father of Jesus Christ. And the only way to the Father is through the Son.

Faith mustn't be compromised. But there are also pressures to compromise our lives - and these come both from outside and from inside.

I reckon the two biggest of these opposing forces in our world are in the areas of money, and sex.

Sometimes it seems as if our world can't think about anything else.

If we genuinely believe - as Christians must - that sex is a gift from God that demonstrates physically the union between a man and a woman in marriage... if we believe that it's a gift so precious that we won't play around with it outside of the place God has given it - if we believe this, then we'll face complete misunderstanding, and

sometimes derision, and sometimes pity, in a world that wants to believe something else.

And those voices on the outside will chime in with the voices of opposition inside us, from our old selves - that say: "It's your body. Do what you like with it."

And it's the same with money, isn't it.

The recession is making money tighter. It's already causing people to lose their jobs. (And I trust that, as it starts to hit us, there'll be a loving sharing of money and possessions amongst us.)

But whether you've got loads of money, or no money, there are always pressures from outside that oppose you - and always voices on this inside - that whisper the big lie to us: "Earn a bit more - spend a bit more - and then you'll be really happy."

You may know other areas of your faith, or your life, where the opposition is bringing you to the edge of compromise.

The edge is a very dangerous place to try and stand for too long.

Maybe God has taught you that lesson in the past. Well, learn it again for the present and the future. Don't compromise your faith, or your life.

The second lesson here should help with doing that:

2. Trust the God who's in control.

Remember how this book of Ezra begins - in the very first verse?

It was the Lord God, it says, who “moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia”, to let the people go back home to rebuild Jerusalem.

This is expressed beautifully in chapter 6, verse 14 - half-way through that verse [READ 6.14b].

God commanded it - and so these other kings did it. They didn't know God - they thought they were doing it themselves. But behind them was what you might call God's “secret command.”

God's control is not a cold, passion-less thing.

Don't ever think that the Bible describes God like some army major, safe in his bunker, playing with other people's lives as he pushes model armies around on his map. Look over at chapter 5, verse 3 [READ 5.3-5]. There's a fatherly protection, here.

This man, Tattenai, was the local governor of Jerusalem - and he was making God's people sweat: ‘Will he clamp down on all our rebuilding work?’

You can imagine them thinking and praying, “Lord, why have you let this man stick his nose in? He might mess everything up!”

But actually, the first half of chapter 6 shows how God works through this man... because he reports everything back to his boss, the king - and the king says: “Of course they can keep building the city. And, Tattenai - you've got to pay for it!”. Look at chapter 6, verse 8 [READ 6.8-9a].

(That's not the last time that central government has told local government that they've got to cough up the money.)

Tattenai must have got these instructions and thought, “Me and my big mouth! I wish I'd never got involved. It's just cost me money!”.

So do you see how God was at work, in control - the sovereign, providential Lord? He made it much “hairier and scarier” for his people for a time - but the outcome was so much better for them than before.

‘God in control’ does not always make things feel comfortable.

‘God in control’ still means that living as a Christian will feel hairy and scary. He will still take us through pain and struggle and difficulty, and we may never know why.

But - because he is ‘God-in-control’ - we know that he has still got our hand firmly in his, like a Dad firmly holding his child's hand - and he won't let go.

There's a verse from the New Testament that people often quote at this point.

It's from Romans - chapter 8 verse 28. It says: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”

That does not mean that by the end of your life you will see some good coming out of everything bad you've been through. You might - but you might not.

What it does mean is this: once we have put our hand in God's, he will surely lead us through life, through death and beyond - to an

eternity with him - and his sovereignty is so powerful that nothing he brings into our lives can ever rip us away from him - unless we choose to let it.

Don't compromise. Trust the God who's in control.

And then, very briefly - in the face of opposition:

3. Trust the God who speaks.

It was God's Word to the people that spurred them on, and kept them going. Look at the very beginning of chapter 5 [READ 5.1-2].

And then over to chapter 6 verse 14 [READ 6.14a].

It was through his words to them that God gave made them prosper.

For us, God's word and his prophecy are fulfilled in Jesus - and written down for us in the Bible.

There's no point just dipping our toes in the Bible from time to time, and then wondering why we find it hard to withstand opposition.

It is through Scripture, and the preaching of it, that God will speak, to make us confident - and make us prosper as followers of Christ.

Will we face opposition in the next few weeks - either from the outside, or from within ourselves - as we plant a new church, and seek a renewed vision for our life together? We may well.

But now do you see how Jesus himself modelled for us the lessons we've seen in Ezra, about how to face such opposition?

When he was tempted by the devil to abandon what God had called him to, Jesus quoted Scripture, trusting in God's words.

When he faced the agony of crucifixion, he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this away from me. But yet not my will but yours be done." He trusted in God's sovereign will and control.

And faced with opponents who hated what he said, and despised how he lived, he never compromised.

What a joy it is to know that, if we are in him, then we are clothed, and protected, and strengthened, by his perfect faith and perfect life, in the face of opposition.