

Exploring Ezra

3. Ezra 4: Opposition When the going gets tough

Aim: To recognise that sometimes when we do the right things that we face opposition and persecution. This passage reminds us that the Jews faced setbacks and allows us explore the different ways in which God's people have been opposed and how to we can be learn to be prepared.

To Start with

When have you tried to do something but failed or ended up facing a setback? How did you react? What did you learn from the incident?
Or (If that feels too personal for where the group is at relationally)
 How do you feel about failure? What pros and cons can you see to it, in principle?

Reading the Passage

Today's passage follows the return of the Jews from exile and focuses on the opposition they faced to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem following the decree of King Cyrus of Persia.

Read Ezra 4:1-3

1. Why do you think their 'adversaries' offered to help and why did Israel refuse their offer? (**Leaders**, see Samaritan History below)
2. Why is exclusive worship of God obviously so important?
3. Read v4-5. What does this response to the rejection of their help suggest to you?

Samaritan History:

The Assyrian government encouraged its residents to move to Israel and to settle there after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. These immigrant people worshipped pagan idols (2 Kings 17:30-31), but also started worshipping Yahweh, whom they regarded as the god of the land in which they now lived (2 Kings 17:32-33). Eventually they intermarried with the Jews who had remained in the land.

Their descendants became the Samaritans, a mixed breed racially and religiously. It was these people who approached Zerubbabel and offered to help the Jews rebuild their temple (v. 2).

Read Ezra 4:6-24

4. In small groups discuss the following questions:
 - a) What accusations did the enemies of Israel file against the rebuilding of the Jerusalem and what proof did they offer?
 - b) What other Biblical examples you can think of in which God's people were falsely accused or harassed to hinder their work for God? What were the outcomes of these situations?
 - c) List some accusations people sometimes make against Christians today to discourage and discredit us.

Have each small group give a 1 minute summary of their discussions.

5. Break back into small groups again to discuss the following questions:
 - a) What can we learn about the way the King responded to the letter?
 - b) Why do you think God allows believers to experience failure?
6.
 - a) What principles might we be able to draw from this passage about to deal with opposition?
 - b) What lessons have you learnt from a recent setback or failure in your life? How was the Lord evident in the incident?

Bring the group back together and if you have time have the groups give some short feedback on their discussions.

Reflection

Spend a few minutes in reflection before you pray thinking about the following questions:

- How could you encourage someone you know who is struggling with a failure or a setback



- How can you turn your next difficult circumstance into an opportunity to minister to others and praise God?

Spend some time praying for each other about opposition you might face. You might like to spend some time in quiet allowing people to talk to God and repent individually - followed by a time of praise, or reading part of Psalm 136.

(NB. Psalm 136 was read in two groups, or a leaders and congregation- one reading the first line and the others responding with 'his love endures forever'; this might be a powerful way to respond in worship and close the meeting.)