

## **God's Provision and Our Difficulty**

Ezra 4

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It's natural for us to fixate on the negative, even to the point where we can't see the positive. In our lives we tend to focus on the pain we endure and the things we lack more than what we have. In Ezra 4 the Israelites are in a situation where they have the opportunity to fixate on their difficulty and overlook God's provision. We must learn from their experience that God provides in times of difficulty not by removing the difficulty but by enabling us to endure it well.

Looking back at chapters 1-3, we see that God has already provided for the Israelites. He moved the heart of Cyrus to allow the exiles to return. He moved the hearts of the Israelites to leave their settled homes in exile to return to their desolate homeland and rebuild. He provided them with money and animals to help with the rebuilding and enabled the foundation of the Temple to be laid, for which the Israelites praised Him in 3:11.

But now in chapter 4 the difficulty arrives. The previous tenants of the land, foreigners brought in by Assyria to settle in Samaria, offered to help rebuild the Temple. These foreigners worshipped Yahweh only as one of many gods, a local god of the land in which they dwelled. They didn't know God or His Law, and they didn't obey Him. They only worshipped Him superficially but lacked a covenant relationship with Him. It's just like those who go to church but don't have the relationship with God that comes through faith in His Son. Illegitimate worshippers of God such as these cannot truly be a part of God's people. So the leaders of Israel refused help from these foreigners. And in response these previous tenants proved their illegitimacy by sabotaging the rebuilding efforts.

The author fast forwards through the reign of four Persian kings in order to show that this opposition lasted for nearly a century. The later opposition in the time of Artaxerxes, when the Temple had already been completed, was focused on preventing the walls from being rebuilt. It was a long lasting grudge, a multigenerational and personal feud. And these opponents had friends in high places (vv. 9-10), so they had channels of communication to the king of Persia, through which they convinced him to cease reconstruction. They also had history on their side (v. 12). Israel had history of rebelling against the empires of which they were vassals, and the opponents used this as a reason to prevent them from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. So the

king listened to the opponents and compelled Israel with force to stop rebuilding. The deck was stacked against the Israelites.

In v. 24 the author goes back to the time of Cyrus and reveals that the opposition succeeded in halting the work on the Temple until the second year of the reign of Darius. This must have been frustrating for the Israelites, and they must have asked God why this happened. By His grace God brought them back and enabled them to lay the foundation. Why was He allowing this opposition to succeed now? There is no hint that the Israelites sinned or did anything wrong to deserve this. We often think of God in a superstitious way. We think that God lets us suffer because we did something wrong. We treat God like karma, or like a computer code that we have control over, that if we debug and enter the right input we should always get the expected output. We think if we do what God wants He must give us what we want. But God isn't like that. God is always faithful and never fails to provide what is best for us. Don't be blinded to His provision by fixating on your difficulties. His provision doesn't mean you won't face hardship and that the requests you make will always be granted. His provision doesn't nullify your difficulty but it helps you endure it. We see this in Scripture. Although through Elisha God provided for the widow by giving her oil, she still had to endure the hardship of providing for her children as a widow. Though Job received children and livestock in the end, it didn't erase the pain of losing his first children. Though Jesus healed the leper, it didn't remove the difficulty of reintegrating into society after being stigmatized for so long. And though Jesus saved us on the cross and gave us new life, we know that until the end we are to expect hardship (Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 3:12). But though God's provision doesn't nullify our difficulty, neither does our difficulty nullify His provision. But what then does He provide that helps us endure this difficulty? Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us that He gives us mercy and grace in times of need. This mercy is compassion, comfort, and concern for our need. He does not cast us away when we turn to Him. And this grace is unmerited favor, sometimes miraculous, but often ordinary. Through Jesus' death and resurrection we have supernatural power within us, the Spirit who helps us overcome sin, renews our minds, and reminds us of God's word. It is grace to turn hearts and minds to the God of mercy and comfort, in whom we can stand firm and endure until the end.