

There's a little acronym that's become common in managerial circles—VUCA, which refers to the perfect storm of life circumstances that sometimes strikes individuals, families, and churches. VUCA stands for “Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.” VUCA is what happens when you face a string of complicated and ever-changing unknowns. I'd say that pretty much defines this COVID-19 season we're in.

But it also so often defines the life of a follower of Jesus. We want to achieve something good and God-honoring, only to find ourselves swirling around in the VUCA. We try to get somewhere we know God wants us to go, only to find ourselves getting nowhere.

None of this should surprise us. I'm thinking of something the apostle Paul said during his first missionary journey. He'd just left the town of Lystra where a mob stoned him, dragged him out of the city, and left him for dead. After that, Luke says he traveled to several other cities, and here's how he summarized his message to the church: *“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22)*. Pretty simple, isn't it? I wonder how many of us heard that when we came to Christ: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”

Becoming a Christian isn't like hopping on a luxurious cruise ship bound for heaven. It's more like climbing into an army tank and driving through enemy territory. We're in a battle, and though we may know the ultimate winner, we've got a lot of fighting to do in the meantime! As believers, the source of our conflict is threefold: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world is the whole of humanity separated from God and in opposition to Him. The flesh is our sinful human nature that we battle every day. And lurking behind the world and the flesh is the devil. He seeks every opportunity to destroy the work of God and to frustrate the plans of God's people. Satan lives in a grand delusion that he's not the defeated foe he is. And he wants us to believe the same.

And this is what we see playing out in the book of Ezra. Remember, about 50,000 Jews had returned from exile to Judea. It's the year 538 BC. They've been in exile, most of them, for 50 years; some for 70 years. Their number one priority is to rebuild the Temple and restore the worship of God in Jerusalem. We saw in chapter 3 how they assembled together and rebuilt the altar and began making sacrifices. And then they all lived happily ever after, right? Isn't that the way it's supposed to go?

But now it's six months later. As they finish the foundation of the Temple, they begin to face opposition. VUCA—things become volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. This opposition comes from various groups who'd resettled in Judea while the Jews were in exile. All of this takes place in chapters 4-5. Just a heads up, these chapters can be a bit confusing because they start in 538 BC, then jump ahead several decades,

and then come back to where they started. But the theme remains the same—opposition and resistance to the work of God.

### Round One: Opposition Through Assimilation

If chapters 4-5 were a boxing match, there'd be four rounds. Round One is what I'd call opposition through assimilation.

**When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, “Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.”**  
Ezra 4:1-2.

The writer is clear — these are the enemies of Israel. They hear the returned exiles are building their Temple for the Lord. This has been going on for six months. They saw the wagons pulled by mules or donkeys, coming from the Mediterranean Sea, bringing wood from Lebanon up to Jerusalem. So they send a delegation with an offer to help, “We'll build with you. After all, we all worship the same God.”

This had to be a tempting offer. I mean, the returned Jewish exiles had been at it for six months. This was hard work! They could use some help. You can imagine the rubble after the destruction of the temple, these huge blocks of stone now lying on top of each other, needing to be hauled away. And, hey, the sooner this Temple is rebuilt, the sooner they can get on with their lives—back to their families, their jobs, and livelihood. Don't you think that's how they felt? After all, this temple building was time away from all of that. And, after all, what's wrong with getting a little help? These people appear to be sincere in their offer.

We need to realize the enemy rarely stands up and says, “Ready or not, here I come.” No! He lurks in the shadows. He comes disguised as an angel of light. That's what we see here. And the leaders of the Jewish people saw through it. Look how they respond.

**But Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.”** v. 3

The offer is refused outright. They'd wanted nothing of their help. Again, these people appear to be sincere in their offer, but what's their real motive? We need to understand these people worshiped the God of Israel, but they worshiped other gods as well. They were syncretists. That is the issue. That's why the Israelites said absolutely not. They're saying no because they wouldn't partner in the things of God with idolaters, even idolaters who said they worshipped the same God. Remember, they're

not just building a road or a bridge; they are building their Temple. This is at the core of their faith. These are holy things.

But it couldn't have gone over well. I could see the headlines in the Jerusalem Times: "Religiously Intolerant Jews Refuse Offer of Help." It would be no different today. We live in a day when truth is sacrificed on the altar of expediency, where belief in absolutes is seen as intolerant. We live in an age of not just political correctness but spiritual correctness. And that means affirming the beliefs of everyone so long as they don't hurt anyone. You know, it's like Raffi. Do you remember Raffi? We used to play his songs in the car with my kids. We all love Raffi. I was listening to a Raffi song with my grandsons the other day. It goes like this:

One light, one sun  
One sun lighting everyone  
One world turning  
One world turning everyone  
One world, one home  
One world home for everyone  
One dream, one song  
One song heard by everyone  
One love, one heart  
One heart warming everyone  
One hope, one joy  
One loving filling everyone  
One light, one sun  
One sun lighting everyone  
One light warming everyone

That all sounds so good. I can see these idolaters singing that song to the Jewish people. "Hey, we are all one. Let's join hands. Let's work together." But they said no, and we should say no with them. You see, the principle is laid down for us in 2 Corinthians,

**Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? 2 Cor. 6:14-16a**

Now we need to be careful in how we apply this. We're not called to be jerks. We're called to be kind and gracious. We're called to befriend the lost and the broken. We can partner with unbelievers in lots of things, like coaching a little league team, feeding the homeless, and improving our schools. We can work with them for the common good of our cities. Remember, the prophet Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon to "...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile..." (Jer. 29:7). But we don't partner in the things of God. This requires prayer and discernment. When do we say yes, and when do we say no? Where do we draw the line? One thing is for sure; we mustn't compromise or water down what we believe is true and right. So that

we don't compromise our conviction, there's only one way to God, and that's through his Son, Jesus Christ. We don't compromise on the moral absolutes of Scripture. We won't water down our faith in the name of tolerance. And we won't share in the things of God with those who do.

So that's round one—opposition through assimilation. And the Jewish people responded well to that. They won that round and continued to rebuild their Temple.

## **Round Two: Opposition Through Intimidation**

Round two is what I call opposition through intimidation. You see, when their offer to help is turned down, they show their true colors.

**Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia. Ezra 4:4-5.**

Now they start to work behind the scenes to bribe officials who probably come to Zerubbabel and say, "Hey, do you have a building permit for that Temple. We have to stop the work until we see one." And notice this kind of thing went on all the way through the reign of Cyrus, King of Persia. Remember, he'd given permission for the Jews to rebuild the Temple. He supported the whole enterprise. But then Cyrus died, and a king named Darius took his place. Darius came to the throne in the year 522 BC, which was about fifteen years after their return from Babylon. And all of this is designed to induce both discouragement and fear in the hearts of the Jewish people.

Let me tell you, Satan has what I'd call "go-to stratagems." Some of us, like me, are dumb enough to fall for the same one time every time. C. S. Lewis pointed this out in *Screwtape Letters* when an older demon is teaching one of his apprentices. He says to him, "Have you tried discouragement because it always works?" That's the stratagem, along with fear, that Satan uses here.

And guess what? It worked. Now stay with me, because here's where it gets confusing. Starting in verse 6 and all the way to verse 23, we have a long parenthesis or digression. You've heard of a flashback, well, this is a flash-forward to the next 100 years when the Temple was finished, but the walls around the city were in need of being built, which would eventually be done under Nehemiah. This was a common literary technique in those days used to emphasize something, and what is being emphasized is how intense and effective the opposition was against the Jewish people as they tried to reestablish themselves in Jerusalem.

You're going to have to trust me on this because we're not going to look at the flash forward but instead jump to where the story we've been telling gets picked up again, and that's in verse 24. So the peoples of the land were trying to induce discouragement and fear in the Jewish people, and they were successful. "Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (v. 24). So discouragement and fear led to disengagement in the work they were called to do, and this went on for about 15 years.

Can you relate? Are you discouraged? Are you discouraged about your family; about your work? Are you discouraged about the church? I want you to know—there's a way out. Amy Carmichael, a missionary to India, wrote,

Everywhere the perpetual endeavour of the enemy of souls is discouragement. If he can get the soul 'under the weather,' he wins. It's not really what we go through that matters, it's what we go under that breaks us. We can bear anything if only we are kept inwardly victorious... If God can make His birds to whistle in drenched and stormy darkness, if He can make His butterflies able to bear up under rain, what can He not do for the heart that trusts Him?

You see, God can bring us out of discouragement, and he did exactly that with the Israelites. How did he do it? What is it that can bring that inward victory, which overcomes discouragement? Look what it says in Ezra 5.

**Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. vv. 1-2**

Do you see the solution? Do you see what caused these butterflies to bear up under the rain? It is the word of God. That's what prophets are all about. They speak forth the word from on high. God's word is powerful. His word brought creation into existence. His word causes dry bones to live. And here it shook these Jews out of their discouragement and resulting immobility in the work of God.

In this case, that word came from two prophets; each has a book named after them in the Old Testament—Haggai and Zechariah. We don't have time to look in detail at what these two men said, but let me give it to you in a nutshell—rebuke and promise. The rebuke mainly came from Haggai, who denounces them for being more concerned for their own comforts than for the house of God. He says,

**"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house" Haggai 1:9**

That's a rebuke, my friends. God says, "You're furnishing your own house with Ethan Allen while my house gets the stuff from Goodwill!"

But there was also a promise, and that came from Zechariah. He said things like this, "*Proclaim further: This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'My towns will again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem!'*" (1:17). You see, we need to be rebuked at times, but we also need hope. The rebuke isn't meant to crush us. There's always the promise of God that he truly loves those whom he disciplines. He won't wash his hands of us. His steadfast love endures forever.

But let me tell you if you've fallen prey to discouragement and if it's paralyzed you from engaging in the work God has called you to do, do not run and hide from the word of God. You won't want to pick up your Bible. You won't want to listen to a sermon. You won't want some friend quoting verses to you. But when it comes right down to it, there's nothing you need more than to hear from God. So stay in his word. Read it. Listen to it, memorize it, discuss it, meditate on it, and obey it.

### **Round Three: Opposition Through Investigation**

Round one—opposition through assimilation. Round two—opposition through intimidation. Finally, let's look at round three. We'll call this opposition through investigation.

**At that time Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates went to them and asked, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?" They also asked, "What are the names of those who are constructing this building?" Ezra 5:3-4**

Tattenai is the governor of this region. He and an impressive delegation make their way to Jerusalem. They see a huge building project. They see stones, "large stones" is how they describe them in the letter they sent to King Darius (v. 8-17). This temple was now beginning to take shape. The letter even describes "timbers in the walls" and how "The work is being carried on with diligence and is making rapid progress." So there's a real structure, a building with huge stones. Tattenai is suspicious. It's like there's something going on in Jerusalem. It looks like a fortress, perhaps a threat to the empire of Persia. So he asks for names. He wants to write them down and report them to King Darius. Who knows what might happen to those individuals?

Then the letter is sent to Darius. It's too long for us to read, but it's there for us in verses 8-17. And, by the way, the first couple of years or so of Darius' role as the king of the Persian Empire was a troubled period, and he was very sensitive to any threats. In the letter, he's told of how the Jews justified what they were doing—that after being taken into exile because of their disobedience to God, they'd been given permission by King Cyrus to return to their land and build this Temple. The letter asks that a search be made in the royal archives to see if that were true. We're not going to see how Darius responds until next week, but for now, I want you to see how the Jewish builders respond to this investigation. You can imagine how worried they must have been. They're under investigation. Names have been written down. Any day an edict might come from Darius telling them to stop the work, perhaps even making arrests. Things could get ugly.

But look what it says in verse 5. "*But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received*" (v.5). Isn't that fascinating? The eye of God was watching them, and because of that, their work was not stopped while they waited for Darius' reply. There's no other reason given for the work continuing. It's not the perseverance of the Jewish workers or the patience of the officials. It's the eye of God. It's a metaphorical way of saying God sees us and watches over us. The Bible talks a

lot about the "eye of God" or the "eyes of the Lord." Psalm 33:18-19 says, *"But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine."*

A few years ago, the Hubble Space Telescope took a photo of an image in space called the Helix Nebula. Some have called it the Eye of God. It's a bright planetary nebula located about 700 light-years away in the constellation Aquarius. Obviously, it looks like an eye. But, trust me, the real eye of God is not so far away. The real eye of God is near us. The real eye of God is involved with us. And here it's the eye of God that sees to it that their work on the Temple isn't stopped.

Do you know, there are things God does and even things God prevents that we're not even remotely aware of? Here he prevents the work from being stopped. What has God prevented from happening in your life so that you might continue to do what you are called to do? We give thanks for things that God does in our lives, but there are ten thousand things God prevents from happening in our lives: accidents, tragedies, deaths, all kinds of things God has intervened in that we know nothing about. He doesn't always intervene, but he's always in control. It's something we should consider and thank Him for. What has the eye of God graciously prevented from happening in your life? What work has he allowed you to continue to do?

Certainly, it's because the eye of God was watching over them that they endured three rounds of opposition and were still standing, still building, still fighting. How about you? Are you still standing and fighting despite facing opposition through assimilation, intimidation, and investigation? Sometimes we wonder why it has to be this way. Why, as Paul said, do you have to "go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God"?

It's certainly not because God is mad at you. You see, we must believe God is absolutely sovereign over the circumstances of our lives, even the ones we don't like and don't understand. And he uses opposition to refine and purify us. Ronald Rolheiser, a theologian, writes,

**Crises of every kind will find us. ...these crises enter our lives not just as challenges to us to retain our balance and stability but, especially, as invitations to stretch our hearts and minds...these crises also includes within themselves an invitation for us to move from being good people to becoming great people.**

Elisabeth Elliott was a person who understood that. As a young woman, she was a missionary who lived among a remote and isolated tribe in Ecuador. Her husband was one of five men killed by them. Years later, she married a professor of theology from Gordon-Conwell, but he too died after they'd been married only a few years. She knew what it meant to serve God and yet live with unexpected loss.

She tells the story of how she used to go visit a couple of friends in northern Wales who had a farm with sheep. She was there at the time

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

of year when the shepherd has to do something awful to the sheep. He has to take his sheep to a huge vat of antiseptic and completely submerge the sheep in it. If they don't go through that, they'll die from being eaten by insects and parasites.

So they have to take the sheep and not only throw it in the vat but actually submerge it and hold it under. She describes how one by one, the farmer seized the animal. It would struggle to climb out the side, but the sheepdog would snarl and snap at its face to force him back under. When it tried to climb up the ramp in a panicky way at the far end, the farmer would catch it, spin it around, force it under again, holding its ears, eyes, and nose submerged for a few seconds. And he was pushing its head under, drowning it at least as far as it could tell, its panicky little eyes would look up over the edge of the vat, and it was easy to see what it was thinking. "What is he doing?"

Listen to what Elisabeth Elliott said about this:

**I've had some experiences in my life, which have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor sheep. There are times I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from my great shepherd whom I trusted. And like these sheep, I didn't have a hint of an explanation. The shepherd has to do that to the sheep, but there's no way the sheep can understand. There are really only two options. They cannot get the antiseptic treatment and die, or they can trust the shepherd without explanation. Those are the only two options. The whole problem is there's a gap between the intelligence of the shepherd and the sheep. Because there's no way to explain it, the sheep have to go through the experience without explanation or else die.**

And those are the same two choices we have. You see, there's an even bigger gap between our great Shepherd in heaven and us. We may never understand why we face so much opposition. We're just not smart enough to know what God knows.

I'll tell you what can happen though. Do you want to know one of the reasons that the book of Ezra was written? Hundreds and even thousands of years later, God's people still struggle with the question they struggled with back then, can we overcome opposition? Can we live as God's people while we're facing opposition, and when we still don't understand everything we're going through?

And the book of Ezra's answer is, without question, yes. We may not be able to understand everything that's going on, but we know the eye of God is on us. And we know we can trust the Great Shepherd because he's not standing there issuing decrees from above. He's the Great Shepherd who actually gave his life for his sheep.

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