

THE STORY

FINDING YOUR STORY IN GOD'S STORY.

Synopsis & Context – Session #21: Rebuilding the Walls

The Exile itself was almost twice as long as the period of time Israel was in the wilderness following the Exodus. Now, even after the decree allowing a return, a period of time, roughly equal to the Exile is keeping the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem from being restored. It leaves one to wonder what exactly motivated their fears, their procrastination, their apathy. At this point, it had been 80 years since King Cyrus first gave the green light for the exiles to return to their beloved Jerusalem. Zerubbabel was among the first to go. Reportedly 50,000 former slaves packed their bags and joined him on the trek back to the holy city in 537 B.C. But many remained beyond the borders of God's promise.

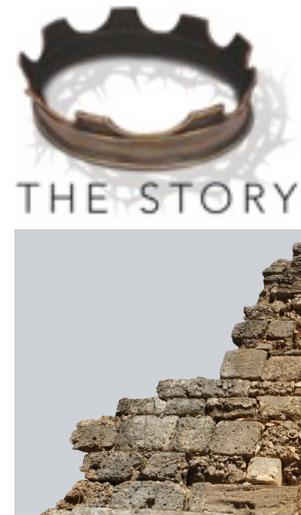
Ezra had earned the favor of Persia's King Artaxerxes during his time in Babylon. The king authorized Ezra to take a second contingent of Israelites back home. Ezra was a faithful scribe and teacher, and he was given permission not only to teach God's law but also a mandate to appoint judges and was given an incredibly generous amount to finance the journey and work ahead.

Nehemiah remained in the palace of Susa as the favored cupbearer of the Persian king. He was dismayed to hear that the walls of Jerusalem remained in disrepair, for without walls, no city would be secure. The king gave Nehemiah leave so he could lead some 42,000 exiles back to Jerusalem. His first order of business was to assess the conditions – people and infrastructure. He quickly rallied the leaders to rebuild.

The leaders of nearby nations, including Sanballat and Tobiah were anxious about the prospect of Jerusalem's comeback. Surrounding nations intimidated, attacked and seemingly attempted to undermine the building efforts in just about every possible way. Nehemiah was undeterred and encouraged his leaders and armed his people. Some worked while others stood guard. Some carried supplies with one hand and a weapon in the other, but the threats continued; even through a false prophet meant to undermine the direction and work. Refusing to entertain empty lies, the wall was rebuilt in 52 days!

As Nehemiah rebuilt the walls, Ezra set out to rebuild God's people. He began by teaching them the Scriptures for the next 13 years. The people gathered to hear Ezra read and other priests joined in to teach as well. Ezra used worship and text to reclaim and *reform* the identity of the People of God. It seemed to work...for a time.

The human need for comfort and stability seemed to get stronger as 'crisis' gave way to a new 'normalcy.' The people's fervor and focus soon dwindled. The priests as well as the people became comfortable, even apathetic. We hear from the final prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi. The context for this messenger is the malaise that has crept-in but not ready to leave any time soon. People loss their passion for God; even the priests had begun to dishonor God with sacrifices that were less than the best. People treated their own families and each other rather poorly and then wondered why God was not pleased with their worship. They withheld their offerings and the whole community began to again turn away from God. Malachi woke up the people to the "crisis of God" during these times when the only thing people are concerned with was themselves. As part of the way to wake-up and reorient, the final visions are of Moses and Elijah – rooting the identity in the history, as well as affirming the promise of what is to come.



Chapter #21: *Rebuilding the Walls* is ‘woven’ from selections from *the Books of the Prophets, Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi* Ezra 7; Nehemiah 1—2, 4, 6—8; Malachi 1—4

Plot Points for Chapter #21: Rebuilding the Walls

God’s sovereign hand is at work, preserving his people and paving the way to blessing if they chose to obey. The Word of God brings revival and reformation to the covenant community. God’s purposes are accomplished through the hard work of prayer, the sweat of faithful labor, and the courage to stand and fight. The people of God cannot dwell in his Promised Land as faithful witnesses if they are living compromised lives, failing in matters of basic obedience and ethical integrity.

Fifty years earlier God had used the political leadership of Zerubbabel and the prophetic voices of Haggai and Zechariah to encourage Israel in rebuilding the temple. Now the Lord sent new leadership to help the people finish Jerusalem’s walls.

At the heart of this chapter are the twin themes of preaching and prayer. Ezra, an anointed priest and teacher, was commissioned by the Lord to call the people to biblically faithful lives. He stood up, read the Law, and saw revival spread among the people. Nehemiah, who provided political leadership to the nation, was praying and seeking God’s guidance at every turn, just like Moses before him.

In that same period, the prophet Malachi was raised up by God and serves as the last of the Old Testament prophets. He challenged the returned exiles not to be satisfied with half measures. After returning from exile to the Promised Land and rebuilding the temple, it would not do for God’s people to compromise again!

Cf. Barr, Adam Exploring the Story: A Reference Companion (Story, The). Zondervan.

God’s Story – YOUR story!

- **There’s more than a little to suggest that we should always read Ezra in light of Nehemiah and vice-versa. Do you feel these two books and messengers complement one another? Why?**
- **Do you feel life is meant to be (or should be) divided into two basic camps, ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’?**
- **What makes Ezra and Nehemiah important for us to reflect upon for our own day?**
- **What are we to make of Malachi? Was the message given him just for that time and context or is there something for us almost 2500 years later?**
- **As we conclude the exploration of the Old Testament, what are your biggest take-away(s)? How would you characterize God as described throughout these chapters?**