

The Story – Chapter 21: *Rebuilding the Walls*

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Introduction

This week is our last week in the Old Testament and we look at Chapter 21 in *The Story*, all about the efforts to rebuild the people and the walls around Jerusalem after the exiles returned to Judah.

If you would like to go read Ezra 7, Nehemiah 1-2, 4, and 6-8 and Malachi 1-4.

Summary of Chapter 21 – Rebuilding the Walls

Chapter 21 opens nearly 60 years after Zerubbabel led thousands of exiles carrying temple treasures, gold, and silver back to Judah to rebuild the temple. Most of the displaced Jews did not return, having settled well in their new communities.

As always in history, some people had hearts fully set on God, and some did not. Later, God sent three people with vastly different gifts to help and strengthen those in the Persian province of Judah who wanted to know him. The first was Ezra, who had been serving the king in Babylon.

Ezra brought 1,500 men and their families with him to Jerusalem, along with lots of gold and silver donated by the king and others. However, Ezra soon discovered that the city’s leaders had been unfaithful to God. Ezra mourned, fasted, prayed over the situation, and led the people into confessing sins and repenting. Then he taught them about God, his laws about loving God and loving people, and God’s purpose for the descendants of Abraham. Ezra ministered to the people’s spiritual needs.

Nehemiah, another gifted leader, helped those in Jerusalem with other needs. Jerusalem’s walls were broken down, and in those days, a city needed walls to protect its inhabitants from raiders and other enemies. Nehemiah also led thousands of exiles back to Jerusalem. His first order of business was to assess the condition of the walls and he quickly rallied the city leaders to rebuild.

However, the leaders of nearby territories were not pleased with the rebuilding project. They were threatened by the prospect of Jerusalem’s comeback. They retaliated with intimidation and made repeated attempts to out-manuever Nehemiah and his rebuilding project. But Nehemiah was undeterred. He encouraged his leaders and armed his people. Some worked while others stood guard. Even when Israel’s enemies enlisted an Israelite as a false prophet to undermine the progress, Nehemiah was not shaken. He refused to entertain empty lies, and the wall was rebuilt in record time—only 52 days!

Although for a time the people returned to the worship of God, old habits die hard, and the people’s fervor soon dwindled. The priests and the people became apathetic, so God commissioned the prophet, Malachi, to speak God’s words of divine warning.

Malachi prophesied the return of the prophet Elijah as sign of things to come. God had restored His people and protected His faithful remnant. He had protected Judah’s royal line in keeping with His promise to David. He spoke His final words of warning and promise through Malachi and then God was silent. God’s people would not hear from Him again until the promised Elijah would step forth as God’s new messenger. God’s redemptive story, for now, was quietly marching toward history’s climactic event.

Discussion Questions

As you read, remember there are discussion questions for each chapter beginning on page 473 of the book and questions that can be found on *The Story* bookmark (which is also on our website). Also, feel free to consider some of the questions below:

1. Ezra "devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (p. 292). How has your own devotion to the study of God's word changed since the beginning of *The Story*? What have been aha moments along the way?
2. Why would the leaders of neighboring nations have felt so threatened by the return of the Jews? What kind of character and faith would these returning Jews need to make the journey and stand against the intimidation of those neighboring nations?
3. One of my favorite quotes from Pope Francis is, "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works." Nehemiah seems to agree, as he demonstrates that faith is a partnership with God involving both prayer and action (i.e., Nehemiah prayed for God's protection and posted guards). What similar experiences do you have where you both depended on God's work and working yourself?
4. Years after the walls had been rebuilt, the prophet Malachi was sent to correct the priests and the people (p. 302). What were they doing that dishonored God? Why does it matter whether we honor or dishonor God? Have you ever had someone confront you when it appeared that you were dishonoring God? What happened?
5. Which of the major characters in this week's chapter do you most relate to: Ezra, Nehemiah, or Malachi? Why?
6. A period of approximately 400 years elapses between the Old and New Testaments. During this period there were no prophets or leaders whose words or lives were recorded in Scripture. These years are sometimes referred to as "the silent years" because people say there was no voice from God. Have you experienced a time in your life when you felt God was silent? As you look back, was God silent, or was something else going on? If so, what?
7. As you think back on all the Old Testament stories you have read over the last four months, what have you learned about God? What have you learned about humanity? Do you think the patterns that seemed to continually play out during these Old Testament stories continue to play out today?