

CHAPTER 21

Rebuilding of the Walls

TIMELESS TRUTH: God always Preserves a Faithful Remnant.

CHAPTER SUMMARY: (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

It's no surprise that the Hebrew people were homesick after 70 years of foreign captivity. 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. Fifty thousand 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 a bottomless expense account to finance his journey.

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 a leave-of-absence so he could lead 42,000 exiles back to Jerusalem. His first order of business was to assess the condition of the walls and the people. He quickly rallied the city leaders to rebuild.

Sanballat and Tobiah were none too pleased. As leaders of nearby nations, 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. Some carried supplies with one hand and a weapon in the other, but the threats continued. 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!

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. At last, they got it! They grasped the reality of God's great story and celebrated the Feasts of Booths as Moses had written of so long before. The people and the priests hungered to worship God and God's people were restored in the Land of Promise.

Yet 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 His words of divine warning. The priests had begun to dishonor God with sacrifices that were less than the best. They treated their wives poorly and 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 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 STARTER:

What's the most extensive remodeling or construction project you have been involved in?

GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. List the three things to which Ezra devoted himself (p. 292). What is significant about this order that also applies to the successful Christian life of every believer?
2. Why is it important for teachers like to be like Ezra - "well versed" and "learned" (p. 291) in God's word? Share with your group who has been your most influential Bible teacher and why.
3. Compare the "first exodus," Exodus 11:1-3 and 12:35-36, with this second exodus. How can you tell that this was clearly God's response to Ezra's prayer (p. 294)?
4. Why do you suppose Nehemiah did not reveal to anyone the plan that God had put in his heart (p. 295-296)?
5. Nehemiah prayed for protection, but he also posted guards. Does this show a lack of faith on Nehemiah's part? How should we "follow-up" after we pray for something?
6. Nehemiah's enemies tried to use the false prophet Shemaiah to distract him from the rebuilding project. How do you determine if a message from God or another source?
7. What can you learn from Nehemiah about leadership?
8. What does Nehemiah teach us about prayer? Do you notice any patterns in his prayer life?
9. 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?
10. According to the prophet Malachi, what is the correlation between one's relationship with God and one's treatment of their spouse?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.