

THE STORY CHAPTER 21

The Story so far ...

The people started to return to the Land. God used Zerubbabel, Haggai and Zechariah in order to motivate the people to rebuild the temple. God then used Ezra the priest to refocus the people on Torah – the book of the Law, which comprised the first 5 books of the OT. Amazingly King Artaxerxes the Persian king had given Ezra a letter authorising him to do what he thought best for getting God's people back to doing God's Law. His motive may have been wrong – he wanted to make sure that God would bless his kingdom – but the practical implications were amazing from the point of view of the returning exiles.

Ezra returned to Israel along with several thousand Jews. The first issue he had to deal with was the fact that the Jews, contrary to Torah, had intermarried with the pagan women in the land.

13 years later Nehemiah got word from Jerusalem that things were not going well. He knew that he had to get back to Jerusalem. At the time he was the king's cup bearer – a very important and trusted position. Nehemiah realised that he would need the Lord's help to get from Persia back to Jerusalem. He spent time in prayer and fasting, and in confessing the sins of the people. Nehemiah then was approached by the king, and he was able to tell the king what his needs were. The king looked on him with favour, and not only authorised him to return, but gave him letters of safe passage and materials for the rebuilding of the walls. Jerusalem was at that time a city without walls. The first thing Nehemiah did on his arrival back at Jerusalem was to explore and plan. He then set about rebuilding the walls. This was met with opposition from Sanballat and Tobiah.

Nehemiah prayed and continued building. Once again they were opposed. Nehemiah had to station sentries to guard them so that the work could continue. So half were guarding, half were building. The next attack was more subtle. Their enemies threatened to tell the Persian king that Nehemiah was being subversive, that he was about to proclaim himself king. Nehemiah called their bluff and the work continued until the walls were completed.

The temple was now rebuilt, the walls of the city were rebuilt. Now Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to recapture the people's hearts for God. They build a huge pulpit, gathered the people, and Ezra read the Law of God while the Levites went round explaining what was being read. When the people heard and understood they were convicted and mourned. "Do not grieve" they were told, "For the joy of the Lord is your strength." They then celebrated the feast of Tabernacles, during which time they continued to hear from the book of the Law.

Then the priests, disgruntled with how things were, grew cold in their worship and service. They still went through the motions but there was no heart in it. God used Malachi, the last prophet of the OT, to bring a final word to the priests and people. Malachi called them back to true worship, telling them that if their hearts were right then their worship would be acceptable. Because their hearts were cold, they were bringing sacrifices which were sub standard – offerings they would not even bring to their Persian governor. Malachi also spoke to them about the way they were treating their wives. He preached about their attitude towards tithing. But he also assured them that where there was true worship, God was there, heard the people, and remembered the people. Malachi assured them that one day God would come as promised.

1. What was Ezra's role when he arrived in Jerusalem?

Ezra was a priest who was well versed in the Law of Moses. We read that he had devoted himself to the study of the Law, and to **teaching** it. In Artaxerxes letter, he addresses himself to Ezra the priest, the **teacher of the Law** of the God of heaven. The letter was written in order to facilitate Ezra **teaching** the Jews. Of course, the Law also had relation to the running of society and Ezra was also responsible for that.

Once the walls of the city were rebuilt under Nehemiah, both Ezra and Nehemiah wanted the people to be living in terms of the Law, and then they colluded and arranged that massive day of **teaching**. It is interesting that the Levites were among the people giving meaning to what Ezra had read. Understanding the Law and its implications for every day life were important.

So Ezra's role was that of **teacher of the Law**.

2. In what ways do you see God's faithfulness in the chapter?

God's grace is seen right at the beginning when Artaxerxes was so supportive of Ezra. Ezra recognized God's grace by taking note that "the gracious hand of God was upon him." And when we read of all that Artaxerxes did to support Ezra, God's grace can be seen. As Ezra said: Praise the Lord who has put it into the king's heart to bring honour to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

We also see the Lord's grace in Nehemiah's life. Once again Artaxerxes responded to the Lord's leading and opened the Persian coffers for Nehemiah to take stuff to Jerusalem, to give letters to those through whose countries Nehemiah would have to pass. God was gracious when trouble came to Nehemiah with the rebuilding of the walls – He kept them, gave them courage. He gave Nehemiah wisdom in terms of how to go about rebuilding the walls. Nehemiah's book remains a virtual leadership manual. God answered prayers. Nehemiah is often seen to be praying – right from the beginning when he set aside time to pray, to his "arrow prayer" when with the king, to praying for the Lord to strength the hands of the people. God graciously answered those prayers. God graciously brought conviction to the people who heard the Law being read.

God graciously raised Malachi up to speak to his people and priests when their worship had grown cold.

3. Why was Nehemiah able to rebuild the city walls amidst such severe opposition?

Of paramount importance was the fact that it was started in prayer – when Nehemiah first heard about the sad state of affairs in Jerusalem he set aside a time of prayer and fasting. He prayed often during the rebuilding process too. He was a man of prayer. As I have said, this is the number one reason for his success amid opposition.

Then he planned. He set off to inspect the walls for himself. We read that it was a thorough inspection. Based on his inspection he was able to plan. Because he had a plan, he was able to deviate from it when the need arose – when they were under threat he could reassign people to guarding. He knew where he was going and what he wanted to accomplish so he could vary the details without changing the over-all aim. To read the full text of the book of Nehemiah will be to see the way he planned and used the personnel to the best advantage.

I think having a sense of God's purpose means that when there was opposition he was able to face it and work through it. Without that sense of call, or commitment, we are far more likely to give up in the face of opposition.

4. What can you do to gain a greater dependence on God in difficult circumstances?

Regardless of *what* we are doing for the Lord, it needs to start at the place of prayer. To realise our dependence on God, to sense that he is with us and behind us. The sense his call to do the difficult task we are about to do. All that is gained in the place of prayer.

From the place of prayer we can ask for wisdom and direction. It is not unspiritual to plan. On the contrary, it IS *unspiritual* to fall into a task without thinking it through. Having prayed, and in an attitude of prayer, we plan what it is we need to do, when we do it, we do it knowing that this is God's plan, for which we will need God's strength.

When we face opposition, our default position becomes the place of prayer – as with Nehemiah. That keeps us dependent.

I suppose the short answer is: prayer will keep us dependent on God.

5. According to the prophet Malachi, what did the Israelites do (or not do) that displeased the Lord? Why were these things so evil?

They disrespected God, they showed contempt for God, they defiled God's altar. Of course like us, the people then couldn't believe that they had actually done those things. But when brought the second rate animal – instead of the best they had – to sacrifice, that is how God understood them to be, for example, showing contempt for his name. Especially when they would not take that quality animal to their governor, yet found it good enough for Almighty God. They also treated their earthly fathers with more respect than they did their Heavenly Father; and slaves treated their earthly masters better than they treated God. So God concluded that they were showing contempt for him.

They were dishonouring their covenant relationship with their wives. They were "robbing" God – that is how God interpreted the fact that they did not give God the portion he expected. This question I am sure will lead to discussion. We do not talk about a tenth today. We give what the Lord tells us to give – more or less than 10%. We need to be sensitive to the Lord as to just what that figure is. But for someone who has no idea, 10% is a good place to start. We do not give legalistically. We give in response to what God has given us. Everything we do is a response.

They were saying it was futile to please God because they did not benefit materially from serving him. Plus, the age old problem, wicked people seemed to prosper. Conclusion? It is futile to serve God.

6. Are there areas of your life where you are displeasing the Lord? What can you do to make your relationship right again?

Our problem is less a problem of knowing whether we are displeasing the Lord or not. Our problem is a willingness to do something about it. If we are honest with the Lord he will show us areas that displease him. But he will show them NOT to rub our noses in it, but because he wants us to confess it so that we can be forgiven.