Series: The Story

Message: Chapter 21 “Rebuilding the Walls”

Text: Ezra 7; Nehemiah 1-2; 4; 6-8; Malachi 1-4

Theme:

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Location: Christ Community EFC

[Slide 1]

Today is a big day. We are finishing up the Old Testament portion of The Story. It’s been an incredible journey moving through the Old Testament.

Let me ask you a question. How many of you have kept up with your reading? If you have read all 21 chapters or will be completing chapter 21 of the story this week would you please raise your hands?

Let’s give them a big hand. Great job! Now for the rest of you don’t give up. There is still time. You can catch up.

Let me remind you that as we have been going through the lower story stories in our studies through the Old Testament we need to keep them in context of God’s upper story.

We need to make sure that we keep a very clear view of the upper story of God’s plan to be in a relationship with us. Back in Genesis 1 and 2 we saw that out of everything God created he gave to us two unique gifts, divine love and the ability to love Him back.

God created us and desires to be in a loving relationship with us, but all the way back to the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, we have chosen over and over again to reject that love and do our own thing.

After Adam and Eve rejected God’s love in Genesis chapter 3, the rest of the Bible is God’s upper story, the unfolding of God’s continued love for us and the extreme measures He is willing to go through to win us back. God is seeking to bring each one of us back into relationship with Him.

To accomplish this God chose in Genesis chapter twelve one man Abraham through whom God was going to work out his upper story.

Through Abraham, God builds a nation, the nation of Israel. And God is working out His upper story to bring salvation though the nation of Israel to all of the world.

But if you have been reading you know that down here in the lower story God’s people have not always responded to God’s love so well.

The name Israel literally means “he who wrestles with God.” How appropriate. We have seen this worked out in the lower story of Israel over and over and over and over again. This actually gives me hope!

If fact there were a few weeks where I could have just summed up the message by say “And the people did evil in the sight of God.”

God wants to have a relationship with His people but they continued to ignore Him. God wants to have a relationship with His people but they began to say no we want to do things our way.

We want our golden calves. We don’t want the food that God is providing we want meat.

We don’t want God as our king. We want our own king like all of the other nations. We don’t want one god we want the gods of the people around us. We want to live the way we want to live.

I would love to have a dollar for every time I have thought to myself “Don’t these people get it!?”

But let’s not get up on our high horses and look down on the Israelites.

Let me ask you this. How many of you would say that you want to be faithful to God and to God alone? Raise your hand.

Alright now let me ask you another question. How many of you would say that you struggle to be faithful to God and God alone?

That is what I thought. About the same number of hands went up because it is a struggle. It is difficult.

I think your desire is the same as mine and that is to have what could be call a once and for all faith.

A once in for all faith is a faith that says that I am going to stand with God, I am never going shake and I am never going to slide, I am never going to walk away, I am never going to turn my back on God, and I am never going to take God’s grace and my salvation for granted.

I am going to have:

[Slide 2] I. A **once** and for all faith

As we look into Chapter 21 of the Story, which covers Ezra chapter 7-10, much of the book of Nehemiah, and the book of Malachi.

The context here is that the southern nation of Judah had been taking away in exile to Babylon. The last group was taken in 586 BC and that was when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

The temple was for the Jews more than a place of worship because it represented God’s presence with them. So with the temple destroyed and the people taken into exile it would have felt like God had left never to return.

But God had promised the Jews, through His prophets, that in 70 years they would once again return to their land and the nation would be restored.

And at the end of those 70 years God moved on the heart of King Cyrus to let the Jews go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

Then last week we looked at the story about the Israelites who did not go back to Israel but remained spread out in Persia Empire.

Through Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jews who were still in Persia were saved from Haman’s evil plot. The events in Esther take place between chapter 6 and chapter 7 of Ezra.

This morning we are picking up in Ezra chapter 7. Here we are going to see a second group of Jews returning to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra the priest.

**So, would you turn in your Bibles to Ezra 7:1?**

**After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes** **king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah** [then we are given a brief genealogy of Ezra, but note here in verse 5] **5 the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—**

Ezra is a priest from the line of priest dating back to Aaron the brother of Moses. Once again we see the thread, the story line of God’s upper story working out.

Let’s go on, verse 6.

**6 this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.**

**7 Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.**

So Ezra is allowed to go back to Israel but he is not going alone.

The king allows Ezra to take with him teachers of the Law, priests and worship leaders. The king will bless him with finances and supplies and letter of authorization and protection.

So Ezra goes back to Jerusalem to teach the people the Law, the remind them of the Old Testament covenants, commands and promises of God.

And when he arrives in Jerusalem he discovers that things are worse than he thought. After all it has been a full 80 years sense the first group of people came back to rebuild the temple.

And although they had rebuilt the temple, they had not rebuilt their spiritual lives

You would think that they would have remained faithful to God. After all they had been though they should have a once and for all faith.

But instead, they had begun to turn away, again. So when Ezra arrives back in Jerusalem he reports in:

“…**The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. 2 They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness."**

And Ezra said:  **3 When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice**.

So Ezra begins to pray that the people would turn their hearts back to God. And then he began to preach a message of conviction, of their unfaithfulness and a message of repentance and God’s forgivness.

And to their credit they hear the message and they responded to it.

Ezra calls them to have a once and for all faith and they listen and they responded and the people turned from unfaithfulness to faithfulness and began to follow God once again.

Now that’s what’s going on in Jerusalem. But back in Susa one of the capital cities of Persia, Nehemiah, a Jewish man, was serving as the cupbearer to king Artaxerxes.

As a cupbearer, Nehemiah was in a position of incredible trust and authority. Keep in mind that the king was always being threatened. His life was always in danger. He had enemies and people who wanted him dead so they could take the throne.

The easiest way to kill the king would be to put some poison into the king’s food or drink. So the cupbearer was with the king all the time.

Before the king ate or drank anything is was the cupbearer’s job to eat and drink some of it first. If he didn’t die then it was safe for the king to eat to drink.

This put the cupbearer in a position of great trust and one which would mean that he was always near the king. So the king would often use the cupbearer as a trusted advisor as well.

So now Nehemiah was in this trusted position and would have influence with the king.

Then some 12 years after Ezra lead a group back to Jerusalem, Nehemiah gets word what was going on back in Jerusalem.

Ezra went to teach the people the word of God but the people had failed to become doers of the word.

So Nehemiah learns that the city walls are in total ruin.

Now that might not mean much to us today but back then the walls of the city were critical to the survival and defense of a city.

It would be like you taking the door and windows out of your home. Anyone, at any time could come in and take whatever they wanted.

With no walls around the city the temple that had been rebuilt and was filled with gold and silver was open to plunder at any time.

So when Nehemiah heard that the walls were broken down the news broke his heart and he felt the call of God to do something about it.

So the Bible tells us that Nehemiah began to pray and he began to fast.

He prayed that God would somehow open a door of opportunity so that he could go and do something about this difficult situation.

Then one day the king calls him to come and serve him and as he comes into the kings presence the king noticed that Nehemiah was sad.

So the king asked him what was wrong. And Nehemiah told the king in Nehemiah 2:3-5:

“…**May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"**

**4 The king said to me, "What is it you want?"**

**Then I prayed to the God of heaven,** Isn’t that cool! Nehemiah prays before he says anything.

**Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 5 and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it**.”

And the king not only gives his approval but he said take as many people back with you as you want.

But if that wasn’t enough, the king goes on to say go and take all the people you need and I will provide you with all the building materials you will need.

And not only that, I will send letters with you so the people who live there will know that I am commanding you to rebuild the walls and that I am commanding them to help you rebuild the walls.

So Nehemiah goes back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. But when he gets there he discovers that the walls are worse than he had imagined.

So he gathers all the Jews who had come back from the exile. Some of them are the descendants for those who came back over 100 years before and some are those who came back with Ezra.

And he says to them, what have you guys been doing?

You have built your own hoses and you rebuilt the temple but you have not built the walls to protect the city of God.

It’s time for us to get busy! And so they all began to build the walls with all their energy and all their heart.

In Nehemiah 4:6 is says: “**So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart**.”

So at first the people worked hard until the wall reached half its height.

But let me ask you a question. What good is a half built wall?

I mean a wall that is built half way is really not much better than no wall at all. It’s like a lukewarm Christian.

But that is where they stopped. Why did they stop there? (Good question.) Well they stopped because:

II. They faced **opposition**

They face opposition from outsiders like we face today when we take a stand for our faith.

When Nehemiah came back to Jerusalem there were other groups, people around Jerusalem who didn’t want the walls to be rebuilt.

They didn’t want the walls rebuilt because they felt that if they did then Jerusalem would rule over them. So they tried to thwart the Jews from building the walls.

First of all they faced:

A. Opposition in the form of **ridicule**

In the first three verses of Nehemiah chapter 4 we see these outsiders came in and mocked them. They said oh you will never rebuild the wall. You’re too weak, the walls too messed up. A fox could knock over what you have already built. There is no way you will ever get this done.

These outsiders ridiculed and mocked them, just like someone might mock you at school or work or even in your family when you take a stand for your faith, when you try to build your life by following Christ.

They also faced the:

B. Opposition of **fear**

You see these people from the outside would attack at different spots and at different times.

The people began to fear, they never knew where the attack was going to come from or when it was going to happen.

So fear spread throughout all the people. And fear is one of Satan’s greatest tools folks.

Opposition also came in the form of:

C. Offers to **compromise**

These outsiders sent word to Nehemiah and said come on now, let’s compromise. We’ll help you build the walls. Just come out and meet with us.

Let me tell you, you don’t want your enemies building your walls or helping you make important decisions or influence you to do what is wrong.

Nehemiah also knew that if he went outside the city to meet with them that they would kill him and that would be the end of building the walls.

When we settle, compromise with the world’s standards over God’s standards we get sidetracked and the work of God stops!

But not only did the opposition they faced come from the outsiders but they also:

[Slide 3] III. Experienced **internal** opposition

At first it was:

A. Opposition in the form of **discouragement**

In Nehemiah 4:10 the people of Judah began to cry “**The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall**.”

I can just hear them. Oh we’ve worked so hard and we’re so tired can’t we stop now, after all we’ve worked with our whole hearts and the wall **is** half done. Can’t we just settle with this?

I mean I go to church. I read my Bible. Isn’t that enough! You mean you actually want me to do with the Bible says? You want me to reach out to others, to love them and to serve them even when it’s hard, even when no one seems to care or listen?

They were discouraged and they wanted to quit before the job was done.

They also experienced internal:

B. Opposition in the form of **bickering**

In Nehemiah 5:1-5 some of the people said we are doing more work than other people. It’s not fair, we working harder than they are.

I’m giving more money to build this all then they are. I’m building the walls so I can’t plant my crops and take care of my family while they are out there taking care of themselves.

They are putting themselves first while I am putting God’s work first. It’s not fair! That’s not right. Internal bickering ran rapid.

Finally they began to experience the:

C. Opposition in the forms of **lies** and **gossip**

This came from both the outside and from the inside.

People began to tell lies about what was going on inside the city. In fact in Nehemiah chapter 6: 5-10 the outsiders even sent word to the king of Persia that Nehemiah was trying to build a wall so that he could become king over a new nation in defiance to the Persians.

Opposition!

So what was:

[Slide 4] IV. Nehemiah’s **response** to the opposition

Nehemiah gathered the people together as they faced this opposition and he said this is what we need to do.

First of all he said to the people, you need to go out and get yourselves some swords.

1. Get a **sword**

These outsiders are going to come after you so you had better be ready defend yourself.

You need to have something that you can defend yourself with. So grab your sword.

The Bible says in Nehemiah 4:9: “**But we prayed to our God**; note they started with prayer.

**But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat**.

2. Stand **guard**

They needed to have swords so they can be prepared to fight, to take on the external opposition. But Nehemiah also encouraged them to work.

He said to them take your sword but:

3. Do the **work** that God has put before you

In fact in Nehemiah 4:16-18 we are told that: “**From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor.**

**The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah 17 who were building the wall.**

**Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, 18 and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked.**”

So they had to be prepared to do battle but they also had to do the work.

And they worked hard. And the Bible tells us that in 52 days they completed building the wall.

And when they finished rebuilding the wall Ezra gathered all the people together at Nehemiah’s direction. And Ezra began to teach them the word of God. He began to teach them the laws of Moses and the covenants and about the feast and celebrations.

Then for seven days they celebrated the feast of the tabernacle. And they began to renew themselves to this faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints.

Friends, listen:

[Slide 5] V. God is calling **you** to a **once** and for all faith

If you will listen to what the people of Israel did you too can have faith that is a once and for all faith.

First of all you need to keep the sword with you. Oh, not a literal sword but the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.

In order to keep the sword you need to know it and study it. But you also need to be doers of it.

You need to be willing obey and follow what is says.

You must be on guard and always prepared to defend your faith, or face the oppositions.

You never know where oppositions are going to come from. Don’t get lazy or distracted by the business of life and let your guard down and let the oppositions take over.

And you must acknowledge that oppositions don’t always come from external sources. Often they come from within you.

Exercise the Spirit of God that lives inside of you!

Be in an active relationship with Christ to keep Satan from messing with your mind and making your emotions a playground for himself.

If you and I will take this to heart and commit your life for following Christ and yield to the Spirit of God you will be able to have the kind of faith that is a once and for all faith.

But you know a faith that is once and for all isn’t easy. It takes courage.

Will you be courageous? Listen to this.

[Show video – Courageous see: <http://youtu.be/cTYSirKUiVw>]

Ezra and Nehemiah close out the historical portion of the Old Testament. Malachi is the last prophet to speak to the nation of Israel before they enter into what is known as the 400 Silent Years.

Over those 400 years, between the end of the book of Malachi and the birth of Christ for the large part the voice of God is silent except through His word the Old Testament.

But Malachi ends his message with a call to the people of Israel. He gives them a challenge to say will you have a once and for all faith.

Will you walk faithfully with the Lord, not like the generations that have gone on before you and have done evil in the sight of the Lord?

Will you commit yourselves to following all that the Lord has commanded?

Then at the end of this message we read in Malachi 3:16 “**Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name**.”

They made a covenant; they signed their names to a scroll saying “I will follow the Lord my God”. “I will have a once and for all faith. I will not slide. I will not fall away.”

And yes over the next 400 years there were some who did fall away but for the most part for the next 400 years to people of Israel waited faithfully for the coming of the Messiah.

The challenge for us is which Old Testament Israel example are going to be like? The ones who served for a season and then when opposition comes they fall away?

They fall away because it’s too hard, cost too much.

Or are we going to stand with a once and for all faith.

Would you stand with me as we close in prayer?