THE STORY CHAPTER 21

Rebuilding the Walls

March 4-5, 2017

Appearing on the Big Screen…

**Your mess is no match for God’s mercy.**

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**4**When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. **5**Then I said:

“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, **6**let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you.

*Pg. 295; Nehemiah 1:3-6*

**1. Rebuilding starts with prayer.**

**17**Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” **18**I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.

*Pg. 296; Nehemiah 2:17-18*

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!”

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**2. Rebuilding requires focus.**

“Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; **3**so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”

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**3. Rebuilding leads to worship.**

Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worship the Lord with their faces to the ground.

*Pg. 300; Nehemiah 8:6*

THE STORY CHAPTER 21

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Travis Eades, Campus Pastor

Oak Hills Church, San Antonio, TX

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**To view The Story Chapter 21 sermon video by Travis Eades,** [**CLICK HERE**](http://media.oakhillschurch.com/default.aspx?page=3679&item=573)**.**

If you’re new to Oak Hills or tuning in for the first time, we want you to know that we’ve been reading through the Bible this year from Genesis to Revelation using a resource called the Story. It lays out the Bible in chronological order so we can see God’s one big story unfold.

In fact, I don’t know if you noticed, but today we have achieved a milestone. We’re in the last chapter in the Old Testament. Go ahead and give someone a high five and say, “Congratulations, you made it!” This is very exciting to me. You see with every turn of the page the heartbeat has grown louder and louder as we get closer and closer to the climatic point of God’s story. Everything that we have read to this point has been to point to Jesus.

Now, I'm excited about what we’re going to talk about today but I’m telling you, you are not going to want to miss the next six weeks. Max is back next week and we are beginning the New Testament and will be exploring the teachings and life of Jesus leading right up to Easter. So, mark the next six weeks on your calendar. While you’re at it, go to your neighbor’s house and mark their calendars too. It’s the perfect time to invite someone to a service or to your Story Group. You never know when a simple invitation could be a turning point in someone’s life.

A couple weeks ago, Annie invited me on a daddy daughter date. Actually, I think it was her idea because it involved picking her up a few minutes before school let out so we could go watch the latest greatest animated movie called, “Sing!” I guess because we got there before school let out, we were the only ones in the whole theatre. That was exciting for her. She said, “Dad, you don’t have to turn your phone off because there’s no one here to distract. Wasn’t sure how I felt about her logic but the lights went down, the movie came on.

Now, about an hour and a half later, which is plenty of time to solve any problem in a good kids’ movie, the plot takes an unexpected twist. The main characters had found themselves in a big mess but in their pursuit to clean it up, they ended up making an even bigger mess.

Now I’m thinking either this movie is going longer than an hour and a half or I just scarred my 9-year old by taking her to the very first animated Greek tragedy for children. I leaned over to Annie and said, “Well, might as well just leave now. This thing is over.” She didn’t flinch. She kept watching. She apparently had more faith in the writer than I did.

But in my defense, I couldn’t see any way for this to end well. I wanted my happy ending and I wanted it right now. As far as I could see, it was just one big mess.

Ever found yourself in a mess? Of course, we all have. Maybe like the characters in the movie, you’ve even tried to fix it and made it even messier? Life is messy. People can be messy. Maybe for you it’s a financial mess, a mess of a marriage, mess of a grade point average, a mess of addiction.

Maybe it’s not a mess you made but just the result of living in a messy world. Messy politics that has you wondering how it’s all going to turn out. Messy relationships have left you bitter and angry. Where could the story possibly go from here? Is there any chance for a happy ending? A chance to start over? And if so, where do we start?

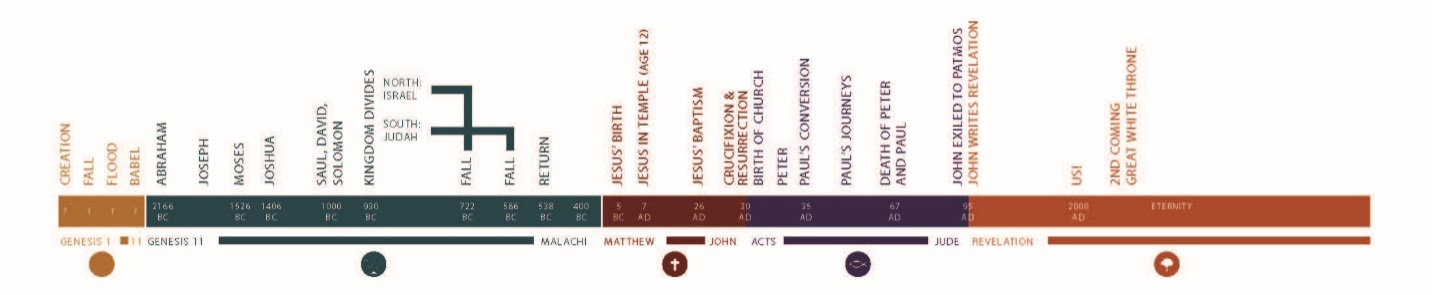
I think some of the answers can be found in our chapter today that centers around the nation of Israel who had some starting over to do.

Let’s pray and we’ll dive into Chapter 21.

*Prayer*

Let’s take a look at how we’ve gotten here. There are really two stories unfolding here. One is God’s beautiful upper story of pursuing his people to bring them back to a relationship with him. Then there’s the lower story of how things are lived out through his people. And, well, most the time, if we’re being honest, it looks like one big mess.

*Refer to Timeline poster.*

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Take these last 21 weeks for example. We’ve seen a lot of points in history where it would have been easy for God to scrap the whole plan. And who would have blamed him? Adam and Eve rejected God’s plan. Instead of displaying his glory, they wanted it for themselves. Abraham-He lied about Sarah and said she wasn’t his wife. To be fair she did let her husband sleep with another woman and then hated her for it. Jacob? Pathological deceiver. Moses? He had a real issue with his temper. King David. He committed adultery and then murdered her husband to cover it up. The prophets dealt with depression, impurity, unfaithful spouses, and broken families.

The nation of Israel would turn away from God and they would become divided. They were not without hope because God was not without a plan but their disobedience had come at a high cost. In 586 B.C., their homeland would be ravaged by the Babylonians, Solomon’s temple destroyed, their people sent away to a foreign land.

Where could the story possibly go from here? If it were a movie, I might be tempted to head for the exit. Go catch something a little happier. Maybe that’s the way you’ve felt reading through the Old Testament.

But as you’ve probably figured out, the story was far from over. God was not finished with his people. He had made a covenant, a promise to his people that he would bring them back: Back to Jerusalem and back to himself. And when God makes a covenant, he keeps it unconditionally.

This is the truth the Israelites would discover and I believe holds true for us today:

**Your mess is no match for God’s mercy.**

70 years had passed, and just as God had promised, the Jews began to return to Jerusalem, the temple would be rebuilt, but the walls of the city were still laying in ruin. A constant reminder of Israel’s brokenness and disgrace.

This is where we’re introduced to Nehemiah. Some 70 years later we find him living in style some 800 miles away from Jerusalem in Persia. He was a cupbearer for the king. One of the things he would do was taste the king’s wine to make sure it wasn’t poisoned. Kind of like the type things I do for Randy.

But Nehemiah receives this word about Jerusalem and it absolutely wrecks him.

You see this in your Story books on page 295 or in your Bibles in Nehemiah 1:3-6:

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**4**When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. **5**Then I said:

“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, **6**let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you.

*Pg. 295; Nehemiah 1:3-6*

Out of great empathy for people he had never met, he wept. He mourned, fasted, and prayed. He knew what was at stake. This was not just about physical renewal of a city, but spiritual renewal for God’s people.

Notice where it all starts for Nehemiah:

**1. Rebuilding starts with prayer.**

The temptation is so strong when we find ourselves in a mess to say what am I going to do? Nehemiah goes immediately to the only one who can do anything about it. And what does he do in prayer? He begins by reminding himself of who God is. He is a great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love. Then he asks God to hear his prayer as he confesses sin. If you’re looking for spiritual renewal, a place to start over; Prayer is the place to start.

He prays for success with the king and God grants it. Nehemiah, like Esther who we read about last week, believes so much that this mess is no match for God’s mercy, that he is willing to put his life on the line and goes before the king.

Turns out, Nehemiah’s faith was well placed. Nehemiah would say, “Because the gracious hand of God was on me, the king granted my requests.

The king did more than that. He sent him with everything he would need for safe travel and materials to rebuild the city walls.

God as he often does, is working through the rulers of all nations to write his story.

Because of the safe passage set by the king, Nehemiah makes good time getting to Jerusalem. But here’s another lesson in rebuilding. Once again we see this pattern, he doesn’t jump to action right away. He prays and observes the situation himself and then and only then does he goes to the people.

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They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.

*Pg. 296; Nehemiah 2:17-18*

The people were eager to get started but not everyone shared their enthusiasm. Some like Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, stood to lose political ground and accused him of rebelling against the king. That obviously wasn’t true but when that didn’t work they tried to discourage him. Look at this:

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!”

*Pg. 297; Nehemiah 4:3*

What does Nehemiah do? He returns to prayer as his enemies return to the drawing board.

Their next strategy? They plotted to kill him. As the walls went up, so did the blood pressure of the enemy.

By the way, Sanballats and Tobiahs still roam the earth. Maybe you’ve met them. Try to do right and they will do you wrong. Try to pull yourself up, they will pull you down. Be prepared, but don’t be caught off guard. Notice what Nehemiah did.

He posted entire communities, families, at the lowest points of the wall at the “exposed places” so the work of rebuilding could continue and protect the workers at the same time. Some would have a brick in one hand and a weapon in the other.

The same holds true for us. We all have exposed places in our life. Places of vulnerability and weakness. The question is, “Who’s standing guard for you?” Are you trying to do life alone or do you have others who can strengthen your defense in the places you’re most vulnerable? It’s an important question for anyone wanting to start over.

In Nehemiah’s case, this strategy frustrated the enemy so much they never as much made a move. God’s people had not given up but neither had the enemy.

There was one last card to play. One powerful, last ditch effort. It’s powerful because most of us never see coming. They simply sought to distract.

**2. Rebuilding requires focus.**

If they can’t discourage him, if they can’t kill them, they’ll distract him.

Nehemiah had rebuilt the walls but not the doors in the gates. So Sanballat and Geshem sent this message:

“Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; **3**so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”

*Pg. 298; Nehemiah 6:2-3*

Don’t you just love that question? Why should I go down to you? Don’t you know I am carrying on a great project?

Wish you had a great project? You do. It doesn’t matter if you’re single, married, raising children, empty nester, rich or poor. You’ve been given a great project.

It might be raising children, mentoring someone, or being mentored to become more like Jesus. Praying with or for a coworker. It might be a simple invitation to a neighbor to come with you next week. It’s probably not rebuilding a wall, but it might be helping to rebuild a life. It might be starting with your own. And because your mess is no match for God’s mercy, you can know, just like Nehemiah, he will fight for you.

And did God ever fight for his people. They finished the wall, set the doors in place in a mere 52 days. This was unheard of. How did they respond? Did they pat each other on the back? Did they gather and say, and the award for best wall building strategy goes to, Ezra. Sorry. Wrong envelope. Nehemiah! No. They knew where to give honor. Notice what they did. They worshipped.

**3. Rebuilding leads to worship.**

Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worship the Lord with their faces to the ground.

*Pg. 300; Nehemiah 8:6*

As it turns out, Annie was right. That movie we went to see actually had a very happy ending. As we walked out of the theatre, she was quiet. Then out of nowhere she said, “Aren’t you glad we didn’t leave? Think about all we would’ve missed.”

Your mess is no match for God’s mercy. His mercy has a name. His name is Jesus. When you give your mess to him, God doesn’t see what you’ve done; He only sees what Jesus has done at the cross.

Let the cross be the final word on how your story ends.

Do what Nehemiah did. Start with prayer, stay focused, and take time to worship. God was faithful to guide Nehemiah and he is the same God who will faithfully guide you.

*PRAYER*