

RECAP**This week's focus: Our God will fight for us.**

It's no surprise that the Hebrew people were homesick after 70 years of foreign captivity. 80 years had passed 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 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.

Leaders of neighboring nations, Sanballat and Tobiah, were none too pleased. They were threatened by the prospect of Jerusalem's comeback. They retaliated with criticism, threats, and intimidation. They 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 in 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 such empty lies, and the wall was rebuilt in record time—only 52 days!

As Nehemiah had rebuilt the wall, 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! 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 passion soon faded. 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 a sign of things to come. God had restored His people and protected His faithful remnant. 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.

SHARE (5-10 min)

Icebreaker Question: What's the most extensive remodeling or construction project you have been involved in? What kind of distractions or opposition did you face?

STUDY (about 30 min) Read Nehemiah 4

1. Reflect on last week's reading and the sermon. Is there any truth that stands out as being particularly helpful, insightful, or difficult to grasp?
2. Read Nehemiah 1:1-4. Why do you think Nehemiah was so moved by the news he had received? How did this motivate him to do something?
3. Read Nehemiah 4:1-3. How would you describe Nehemiah's opposition? How do we typically respond to criticism? In verses 4-6 he responds with prayer. Why is this important when it comes to criticism?
4. Opposition comes from two sources, external and internal. As believers on God's mission, what kind of external opposition do we face? What kind of internal opposition do we face?
5. In our battles we have backup through prayer, God's promises, and His people. How do you use these means to fight the battles you face?
6. 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?
7. Nehemiah's enemies used many tactics (including a false prophet) to distract him from the rebuilding project. How do you determine if a message is from God or another source?
8. What can you learn from Nehemiah about leadership?
9. What does Nehemiah teach us about prayer? Do you notice any patterns in his prayer life?
10. How can you be bolder for the cause of Christ? What practical steps can you take to help connect other people to Jesus?

SUPPORT (15 min)

Share any battles that you might be facing. Pray that through Nehemiah's example you can remain tenacious and use the resources God has given you to accomplish the mission He has given you to do.