



Homecoming

A narrative about the return of God's people to the Promised Land and the need for their hearts to return to Him again.

THE BIBLE

Ezra 1:3-4, 6-9, Malachi 1-4, & Nehemiah 1-2, 4-10

Prepare for the Story

ICEBREAKER

- Have you ever had a task to do that seemed impossible? Why did it seem that way? What were your obstacles? Did you give up, fail, or succeed at your task? How do you feel about it now?

Rewind the Story

Can someone highlight what has happened in the story so far ...

- Exile – The people of Jerusalem taken to Babylon
- The Fall of Judah – Jeremiah & King Zedekiah
- Daniel – Advisor to Kings & Lion Tamer
- Queen Ester – For Such a Time as This

Hear the Story

Scene One: King Cyrus' Decree

God used the faithfulness of His people in exile, like Daniel and Esther, to influence the kings of other nations. Not only was He using them to spread the truth about Yahweh being the one true God, but He was also using their influence to start the process that would complete His promise and bring His people back into the Promised Land.

This process began with Daniel's influence on King Cyrus of Persia. The LORD moved in the heart of King Cyrus, and he made a proclamation throughout his empire, saying: *"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem. Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem."*

With this decree, nearly 50,000 people returned to the Promised Land to begin their rebuilding mission. With long, hard work ahead of them, the people remembered to put first things first. With courage and conviction, they rebuilt the altar to the LORD and then laid the foundation for the house of God.

But not everyone was celebrating this development. The Samaritans and other neighboring people groups opposed the project vigorously, hindering the work as much as possible. They knew that a rebuilt temple would lead to a thriving Jewish nation.

The people became discouraged by this conflict, but once again, God delivered them, sending His prophets. Through prophets like Haggai and Zechariah, God reminded His people that He had not abandoned them and that rebuilding the Temple was important because it was a sign and symbol of something greater that would come.

It wasn't easy, but the people finally rebuilt the Temple. When it was finished, it had been nearly 70 years since Solomon's Temple had been destroyed. But rebuilding the temple wasn't the most important thing for God's people.

Scene Two: Ezra's Mission

About 50 years after the Temple was rebuilt, a respected priest and teacher of the Law, who was living in exile, took a serious interest in making sure that God's Law was heard and followed again in Judah. His name was Ezra.

Another king was on the throne in Persia at this time, and Ezra had his support. So, loaded down with the king's gifts and supplies, Ezra led several thousand of his fellow Israelites on a journey back to Jerusalem.

When he got there, he found the Temple in good order, but he also discovered that the people were intermarrying with neighboring cultures who worshipped other gods. God's law clearly warned the people against doing this.

Ezra was appalled, so he tore his clothes in grief and wept as he prayed, confessing the people's sin, and asking God for mercy as he began the work of trying to bring the hearts of the people back to God.

Scene Three: Nehemiah's Broken Heart

About 13 years later, Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king of Persia, received a visit from his brother, who had been one of those who returned to Judah. Nehemiah was anxious to hear the news of the city of Jerusalem. But the news wasn't what he expected to hear. His brother told him how those who were in Jerusalem were in great trouble and disgrace because the wall around the city had been broken down, and the gates had been burned to the ground. When Nehemiah heard this, he collapsed and wept.

He mourned, fasted, and prayed to God, saying:

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps His covenant of unfailing love with those who love Him and obey His commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for Your people, Israel. I confess that we have sinned against You. Please remember what You told Your servant, Moses. You said: "If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to Me and obey My commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for My name to be honored." Remember, LORD, that the people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are Your servants. Lord, please hear my prayer!"

After this, Nehemiah made many plans and then waited for God to provide him with an opportunity to do something about the walls around Jerusalem. And God provided just such an opportunity when the King asked Nehemiah if something was wrong. Nehemiah was able to tell him about the problems in Jerusalem and his ideas and plans to fix the issues. The king cared for Nehemiah and granted his request. He even provided everything Nehemiah would need for the project to rebuild the walls around the city.

Scene Four: Optimism and Opposition

When Nehemiah arrived, he didn't tell anyone what he was doing; instead, he went and inspected the walls of Jerusalem and its gates. After doing this, he said to the people, *"You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned to the ground. Join me; let's rebuild the wall around Jerusalem, then we won't live in disgrace."* Then, he told them about how God had provided the king's permission and how the king had provided the resources for the project. The people replied, *"Let's get to work, let's start rebuilding."*

Just as the Jews had received opposition from neighboring peoples when they worked at rebuilding the temple, they came under attack for trying to rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, a leading official, were threatened by the power that the king had given Nehemiah. They made it their main goal to disrupt Nehemiah and his project. As the project began, Sanballat was furious, and he ridiculed the Jews, saying, *"What are you feeble Jews doing? Do you think you will really restore that wall? You're acting like you can finish in one day!"*

If that's so, maybe you can bring stones back to life from that heap of rubble – burned as they are!" Tobiah joined in the taunting, saying, *"What are you building? Even a fox climbing up on that would topple your wall of stones over."*

In response to this, Nehemiah prayed in front of everyone, *"Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders."* Nehemiah wouldn't let his people be intimidated or turned away from the task at hand.

The opposition got worse, and those conspiring against Nehemiah began to threaten and attack the people rebuilding the wall. Because of the opposition, Nehemiah had to adjust his strategy. He began stationing some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places. He gave them swords, spears, and bows and said to them, *"Don't be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome. Fight for your people, your sons and your daughters, your wives, and your homes."*

From then on, half of the men did the work, and the other half protected those who were working. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other.

Scene Five: A Rededicated People

Despite the external and internal distractions and all opposition, Nehemiah and the Israelites were able to completely restore the walls around the city. Both Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to ensure that true worship of Yahweh could resume, and so together, they gathered the people to let God's Word speak for itself.

Ezra, the priest, brought the Law out before the people, and he read it aloud from daybreak till noon. All the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. It was read to them, making it clear and giving the meaning so that people truly understood what was being read. Then Nehemiah said, *"This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep."* For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. The people read the Law and celebrated for seven days, then on the eighth day, they confessed their sins and dedicated themselves to living the way God instructed.

Scene Six: Malachi's Message

The Israelites had indeed rebuilt the temple and were worshipping God again, yet it didn't take long for the people and even the priests to stray from their faith. So, God called Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, to offer a final word to the people.

Through Malachi, God issued His warnings against the people's hypocrisy but also reminded them of His never-ending promise. This is what the LORD said to Israel through Malachi:

"Isn't it true that a son honors his father and worker his master? So, if I'm your Father, where's the honor? If I'm your Master, where's the respect? I, Yahweh, the LORD, am calling you on the carpet: You priests despise me! You say, "Not so! How do we despise you?" By your shoddy, sloppy, defiling worship. You ask, "What do you mean, "defiling"? What's defiling about our worship?"

Well, when you say, "The altar of God is not important anymore; worship of God is no longer a priority," that's defiling. And when you offer worthless animals for sacrifices in worship, animals that you are trying to get rid of – blind and sick and crippled animals – isn't that defiling?

So, get on your knees and pray that I will be gracious to you. You priests have gotten everyone in trouble. Why don't you just shut the Temple doors and lock them? Then, none of you can get in and play at religion with this silly, empty-headed worship. I am not pleased; I don't want any more of this so-called worship! Quit offering me something that is a hand-me-down, something broke, and something useless."

"You do know it's your job to teach the truth. People are supposed to look to you for guidance. But you have abandoned the way of priests. Your teaching has messed up many lives. You have corrupted my covenant, so I am showing everyone who you are. Everyone will be disgusted with you and avoid you because you don't live the way I told you to live, and you don't teach my truth any longer."

"And here is another offense: You fill the place of worship with your whining and sniveling because you don't get what you want from God. Do you know why? It's simple because I was there as a witness when you spoke your marriage vows to your young bride, and now you've broken those vows, broken the faith-bond with your companion, your covenant wife. I made marriage, not you; my spirit inhabits even the smallest details of marriage. And what do I want from marriage? Children of God, that's what! So, guard the spirit of marriage within you. Don't cheat on your spouse. Because I hate divorce, I hate the violent dismembering of the "one flesh" of marriage. So, watch yourselves. Don't let your guard down, don't cheat. You make me tired with all your talk. "How do we tire God out?" you ask. By saying, "God loves sinners and sin alike. God loves all." And also, by saying, "Judgement? God is too nice to judge."

"Listen up! I am sending My messenger on ahead to clear the way for Me. Suddenly, out of the blue, the Leader you've been looking for will enter His temple; keep your eyes open because He is on His way! But who will be able to stand up to his coming? Who can survive his appearance? He will be like white-hot fire from the furnace. He'll be the strongest soap at the laundry. He'll take his place as a refiner of silver, as a cleanser of dirty clothes. He'll scrub the priests clean, refine them like gold and silver until they're fit for God, fit to present offerings of righteousness. Then and only then will Judah and Jerusalem be fit and pleasing to me, as they used to be in the years so long ago."

"Yes, I am God, Yahweh, the I Am! I haven't changed. And because I haven't changed, you, the descendants of Jacob, haven't been destroyed. You have a long history of ignoring my commands. You haven't done a thing I have told you. Return to me so I can return to you. But you ask, "How do we return?"

"Begin by being honest. Do honest people rob God? But you rob me day after day. You ask, "How have we robbed you?" The tithe and offering, that's how!

And now you're under a curse – the whole lot of you – because you are robbing me. Bring your full tithe to the Temple treasury so there will be ample supply in my Temple. Test me in this and see if I don't open up heaven itself to you and pour out blessings beyond your wildest dreams.

Honor me, and once more, you'll see the difference it makes between being a person who does the right thing and one who doesn't. The difference between serving me and not serving me."

Retell the Story

- Who was the first leader to take some of the people back to Israel?
- What project did the first group of people work on?
- Who was the priest who took an interest in teaching the Law again?
- Why did Nehemiah decide he needed to return to Jerusalem?
- What did Nehemiah do once he got to Jerusalem?
- When the walls were rebuilt, what did Nehemiah and Ezra do?
- How did the people ultimately respond after Jerusalem was restored?
- What promises did God make through the prophet Malachi

Discuss the Story

- What is your first reaction to this story? How did this story make you feel?
- What stood out to you from this story? What did you notice for the first time?

- What were some things from this story that made you wonder?
- When King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home, only a remnant did so; what do you think motivated people to stay behind?
- When Ezra got to Jerusalem, his heart broke, and he was appalled. What bothered him? Why do you think this was significant?
- When Nehemiah heard about Jerusalem, his heart broke; what did he say to God in his prayer? Where have we seen this before?
- What were Sanballat and Tobiah's comments about the wall and its builders? Why do you think Nehemiah was offended by this? Would you have been offended?
- Nehemiah's strategy to guard against attacks was to have tools in one hand and weapons in another. What lessons might we learn from this strategy?
- God sent the prophet Malachi, once again, to bring the people back to Him. Why do you think the punishment of exile 'didn't take' with the Israelites?
- Did you hear anything that reminded you of previous stories?

- From this story, what did you notice about humans?
- What else are you noticing about God from this story?

Join the Story

1) OPPOSITION

All three leaders (Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah) in our story faced opposition to their efforts. How did they overcome this opposition? If you are NOT facing opposition in your faith, what might this indicate? Are there any Kingdom values or principles you see in the situations these leaders faced regarding opposition?

2) GOD'S PROVISION

For the people to return, rebuild the Temple, and rebuild the walls, God HAD to provide. And He did just that, influencing a number of Persian kings to grant permission and resources to make this happen. What does this reveal about God and His character? Where have we seen this before, and how does this affect your life today?

3) PROPHECY: PRIESTS AND MARRIAGE

Prophetic language often has a deeper meaning. How might the topics of "priests" and "marriage" have application to us today? Check out 1st Peter 2:8-9 and Ephesians 5:25-32 (and/or Rev. 21:1-2) if you have trouble. What do you think God wants us today to understand from Malachi's prophetic message?

Pray

God,

Your sovereign will and purposes cannot be thwarted by any man. You revealed to Your prophets the things that were to come, and You have been working in history to bring those things to pass just as You have promised. Help us have a growing confidence in Your promises. Give us eyes to see Your Kingdom unfolding in front of us every day. And give us the courage to stand in the face of opposition and do what is right and what will honor you. When we are anxious, calm our fears and remind us Who is really in control. Amen.