

The Broken Walls of Jerusalem and the Wall of Separation

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References: **Nehemiah 1**, Nehemiah 1:3-4; 1 Kings 8:53; Mark 12:1; John 10:1; Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 21:9-12; Ephesians 2:19; Psalm 133:1; Acts 5:11-13; Acts 20:29-31; 1 Corinthians 11:3; Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; 2 Peter 3:4; Luke 18:11-13; Nehemiah 1:5-6; Nehemiah 1:8-9; Leviticus 26:27-29; Leviticus 26:31; Leviticus 26:34; Leviticus 26:40-42; Leviticus 26:44-45; Nehemiah 1:10; Nehemiah 1:11

The Broken Walls and the Need for Separation

I'd like you to refer back to our portion from last week. We finished off, I think, in verse 4, but I'd like to just look at verse 3 again. And we have the interview. Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, came back to visit his brother—visit the folks back that are in the captivity in Persia. And when they visit Nehemiah, he asked them how those that escaped and survived the captivity, and those that had gone back to Judah, how they were doing. And their answer was found there in verse 3:

[Nehemiah 1:3 NKJV]

³ And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

There immediately came to my mind, as I thought about it this week, or last week: what was the importance of the wall to Jerusalem? I mean, the altar had been rebuilt, the temple had been reconstructed, the worship of Jehovah was reinstated in the land, in the place where He had promised His name. But the wall broken down, the gates burned with fire. What was so important about the gates then and the wall that Nehemiah, we read in verse 4, reacted so profoundly?

[Nehemiah 1:4 NKJV]

⁴ So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Now those walls had been broken down for about ninety years—ninety years or more. Over one hundred years, I believe. And so what was the problem there? Well, it's because he says that the survivors, they are in great distress and reproach. In other words, the people of God were vulnerable. They were exposed to the attack of the enemy. They were not enclosed. The enemy could come in freely any time of the day or night into that city and trod it down, and they could do nothing about it. They were completely exposed. And not only that, it says they're in great reproach because of the enemy that would probably laugh at them, as we find later on. They treated them with scorn. In other words, their testimony was such that no one even paid attention to them, and that they had no testimony, really.

Yes, there was the temple there. The sacrifices were being done. The priests would minister. The Levites would help. But they were a laughingstock of all the nations. And so when Nehemiah heard this, he wept. Nehemiah was not only a man of action, he was a man of vision. He saw how they were exposed, and that the testimony of Jehovah was just a laughingstock among the nations. And so the importance of the wall and the gates—we must never forget the gates; they built the gates as well. We'll look at those gates a little bit later, the importance of the gates.

But this was a wall of separation. It was the city of God. It was the city where He had placed His name, but it was not separated. It was exposed. And Israel had been a specially chosen people. They were a holy people. In 1 Kings 8, Solomon's address to the nation, 1 Kings chapter 8, verse 53:

[1 Kings 8:53 NKJV]

For You separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be Your inheritance, as You spoke by Your servant Moses, when You brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD."

You separated them from among all the peoples of the earth. They were a holy people. And He had told Moses, or told the people through Moses, that if they obeyed His commandments, they would be a holy people unto Him. So they were specially chosen by God as a separated people from all the other nations. And He gave them His commandments,

His statutes, His precepts, His judgments, numbering somehow over six hundred of them. And these commandments and precepts, statutes and judgments, they were which separated the Jews from all the other nations of the earth. They were like a barrier, those judgments and so on. So God had done all this to keep His people separate.

We read in Mark, for example—we see a couple of pictures of this separation, how God had separated His people from all the other nations. Mark chapter 12, verse 1. The Lord Jesus here speaks a parable of the wicked vinedressers. But just look at verse 1, where a description of this vineyard, which is Israel, and what it says:

[Mark 12:1 NKJV]

Then He began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country.

This hedge—this hedge was a social and a spiritual border that separated the nation of Israel from all the other nations: those commandments and judgments and so on.

Also, if you turn to John in the tenth chapter, verse 1 to verse 6, we find here that the Lord Jesus is saying that He is the Shepherd, that the doorkeeper opens the sheepfold, right? So the nation was pictured as a sheepfold. We read:

[John 10:1 NKJV]

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.

The nation of Israel was enclosed like a sheepfold. It's enclosed by a rock wall or some other type of barrier to protect the sheep from the outside enemies that might destroy the sheep. And He Himself, the Shepherd, was the door. He positioned Himself at the door and then would keep any aliens or any problems, any enemies, out from getting into the sheepfold. And so we read that the Lord Jesus Christ there is the door to the sheep, but Israel is the sheepfold. And now, of course, later on, we read that He said, "I have other sheep that aren't of this fold," but He's going to lead His sheep out of the sheepfold, and they will join with the other flock, and there'll be one flock—speaking of, of course, Jew and Gentile in this dispensation being made one in Christ and following the Shepherd.

But the sheepfold and the hedge are two pictures of God's protection of His people. Not only, though, is it a protection from without, but it's also seclusion within. In other words, the walls of Jerusalem, they were the physical barrier. They were part of this wider barrier, this social and spiritual barrier that actually protected Jerusalem, the place where God has put His name. The walls protected the physical temple. But within the walls of Jerusalem, three times a year, the males were all to come to Jerusalem to worship. And there in seclusion—the Gentiles were excluded from the temple—and there in seclusion, they could worship the Lord three times a year.

So there we have a picture, really, of the purpose of Nehemiah's great distress at hearing the news that the walls were still broken down, and that their testimony were in disarray. And so there was no protection from enemies from without. There was no seclusion there where they could gather in peace, being protected by the outside walls, there to worship the Lord unhindered within the protection of the city walls.

The Church as the Heavenly Jerusalem

But the question I have now is going further from this to make an application to this. Just as Israel or Judah as they came back, the walls being broken down, and God's purposes were that they would be Jerusalem compacted together, the city of God, the walls of Jerusalem protecting and secluding the worship—how do we then apply that today?

How do we then apply this today? In other words, oftentimes, most of the commentaries that you might pick up, they will address the application of this by saying that Nehemiah was a wonderful wall builder, a man of action, a man of prayer, a man of faith, and that we should emulate him in building any work for God. And that application is a valid one. It's a good application. And most of those applications that we have, that we see in the commentaries, or that we might say, is very useful. If we follow Nehemiah's example, when we begin a work, sometimes we have to clear away the rubble. Sometimes we have to weep over the condition of things before we can begin to build. So following Nehemiah's example is a good one.

But I believe that there's a deeper application and explanation for what the book of Nehemiah represents to us today. Now, having said that, I'd first like to thank Vic, because I was talking to Vic this morning. And he said, "You know, the walls of Jerusalem, they're similar to the armor of God in the sense that they are protection for the child of God." And that's a very interesting application. I thought about it, and we could make that application as well individually, that we too are assaulted by the world, the flesh, and the devil himself, but the armor protects us from those enemies. So that's a very interesting and very good application.

Thank you for that, Vic. That's an interesting application. But my thoughts this week went to the church as a whole. The church's enemies, they're not physical; rather, they are spiritual enemies. Now, Vic's thought bears that out as well, but the church as a whole is often spoken about in Scripture as the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Let's look at a couple of scriptures. For example, before we do that, the church then might be an application, if we apply this to what we've seen about the city of Jerusalem of old when it was broken down with fire and so on, and surrounded by enemies. The church has sometimes been involved in much the same condition—the church of God.

So let's look at a couple of scriptures. First of all, Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 22:

[Hebrews 12:22 NKJV]

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels,

That's the mount that the temple was built on: to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. That's really our home. The Christian's home is the heavenly Jerusalem.

Again, let's turn to Revelation chapter 21, and verse 9:

[Revelation 21:9-12 NKJV]

⁹ Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife."

Well, we know who that is. That's the church, is it not? That's another name for the church of Christ: the bride of Christ, that He gave Himself for the bride, His bride.

¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. ¹² Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel:

So even the heavenly Jerusalem, which of course comes down during—this is during the Millennium; this isn't eternity—it has a great, high wall. Even during the Millennium, it has a wall. So if then the Jerusalem above has a wall, would we not think that the church indeed has a wall as well, a wall of separation? What is that wall of separation is the question.

Well, further, we are fellow citizens of the household of God. We read there in Ephesians chapter 2, verse 19:

[Ephesians 2:19 NKJV]

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,

We're no longer strangers or pilgrims, but our citizenship is in heaven, in the holy city itself. That's where the Christian's true home is.

Now, let's look at the church today. The church, in many senses, is in ruins. The wall of separation has been broken down. The city is trodden over, as a testimony here on earth, I mean, by all these different sects, denominations. Some are true, some are false. Some are partly true, some are partly false. We see a great disarray in the church. Darby called it "the church in ruins." Now, he had an extreme view of it and an application which I don't agree with. But at any rate, we see around us the church is not unified. Nor can it be unless the walls were rebuilt, unless there comes a Nehemiah. And I don't think that will happen until the real Nehemiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, the real Comforter comes. "Nehemiah" means comforter. Until He comes, He will unify the church.

Principles of the Apostles' Doctrine

But until then, how are we to build? And what are we to build? What are the walls? What do the walls represent for us today?

We need, just as those in Judah needed, a wall of separation around their holy city to keep the enemies out. We'll read later in Nehemiah that Tobiah actually had an apartment in the temple, of all places! The merchants from far away as Tyre were coming in on the Sabbath day and peddling their fish. Merchants were trodding down the city. The Gentiles had free access to every street in the place. The Gentiles had free access to every street in the place.

Don't we see that in the church today? We see unbelievers preaching from pulpits—so-called pulpits in Christian, so-called Christian churches. You see unbelievers mixed with believers

everywhere in all the different denominations. So, first of all, we need separation from the world's systems, because men have built up their systems in the churches. It's men's systems, not God's systems. And that's why the walls have been broken down by the enemies.

Secondly, just as there needed to be separation from the world, there needed to be separation to the Lord. In other words, those walls enclosed the worshipers. It gave them a peace. Those walls gave them a seclusion where they could worship in peace and in harmony with one another. There would be:

[Psalm 133:1 NKJV]

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell together in unity!

That's what David's prayer was for the people of God. And that could only come when the people of God were united together. They needed to be separated to the Lord for worship, for prayer, and for fellowship.

Now, we don't have that unity now today in the church. We don't see that. I'm talking about the universal church now; I'm not talking about individual local churches where the condition may be different from one to the other.

Now, in the early church, when the church was born, in the very early days after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down and unified that body of believers in the upper room that day, He made them into one, and they were one. Now, just like when you have a newborn child, you protect that child from all the outside influences that might disturb or might harm your infant, your child, your baby. You protect it. And so God did as well. He put a hedge around the early church. Turn with me to Acts chapter 5, and we'll see God doing that. Acts chapter 5, and verse 12:

[Acts 5:11-13 NKJV]

¹² And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch.

So the entire group of believers were there worshiping in the court, Solomon's Porch, a court there in the temple.

¹³ Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.

Now notice verse 11 as well, as we back up:

¹¹ So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

That is, remember, it was the episode of Ananias and Sapphira. God had to discipline them—Ananias and Sapphira his wife—because they lied to the Holy Spirit, saying that some land that they had purchased, that they had given it all to the Lord, when in actual fact they had held back some secretly. Not from the Holy Spirit, but held it back from the apostles; but they thought that they could get away with it. God had to deal with that very, very strictly and very quickly. And so He did. The both of them were taken immediately to heaven. They didn't lose their salvation; they just lost their future on earth, and probably they lost a lot of their rewards when they got to heaven. But the result was God was putting His hand there in discipline upon the young church so that great fear would come. He was putting a hedge around that little company of believers. He was protecting them. It was a wall of separation. Others dared not join them; they were afraid to.

But later on, as the church expanded and grew, and the apostles' doctrine was taught, then the walls began to be erected—the wall of separation. Then Paul had to warn the people, the elders of Ephesus. Verse 29 of chapter 20 in the book of Acts:

[Acts 20:29-31 NKJV]

²⁹ For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. ³¹ Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

He spent three years warning them about this.

The wall of separation: what then is the application here? What do they represent for us as a separation? How can a local church erect a wall of separation around it so that the enemy can't get in, and yet have gates so that every real believer can come through?

The wall of the New Testament church is not the physical walls that surrounded Jerusalem that Nehemiah erected. They are the New Testament principles of gathering. These are the apostles' doctrine. Now, the foundation truths of the walls, of course, are the virgin birth, the perfect life of the Lord Jesus Christ, His spotless humanity, His devotion to His Father, His sacrificial death upon the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and His glorification at God's right hand. Those are the foundations upon which all the other principles of the apostles' doctrine is built.

So some of these principles then that would make an enclosure, walls around any New Testament assembly—any local church needs to pay attention to what the apostles taught. Because just as Nehemiah was able to raise that wall, so we can build block by block. We can protect the local church to keep its purity, to keep the enemy from coming in, and at the same time having gates to allow any true believer to come in. Because there are doorkeepers. The doorkeepers in Jerusalem only allowed those who were Jews to come in who would keep the Sabbath and so on, and exclude all the enemies. So we too have a wall of protection: it's called the apostles' doctrine.

Now let's look at some of those. First of all, one very important truth is the unity of the body of Christ. In other words, there's only one body made up of all true believers all over the world, whether it's in China, or Africa, or in Cambodia, or it might be in Lithuania. You'll meet real believers in every place. Now, they are all part of the one body. And so the local church has to be open; they have to open the gates. That's the importance of the gates we're talking about. The gates would have to be open to include every single one of the body of Christ. Those whom God has received, the local church should receive as well. In other words, a local church that excludes a real, born-again Christian who is walking with the Lord—who excludes them—they have closed the gates then to a true believer. We don't do that. We should not do that. Because the Scriptures say that there is only one body, and the gates are opened for them. So that's a unity; that's something that the apostles spoke about. Especially the apostle Paul emphasized that very fact.

Another thing is the headship of Christ. Now Paul, in chapter 11 of the book of 1 Corinthians, goes over that:

[1 Corinthians 11:3 NKJV]

But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

And that is one of the most ignored portions of Scripture I've found among many, many evangelical Christians. They completely ignore the idea that God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of the man, and man is the head of the woman. And there are symbols that go along with that headship. In other words, it's God's authority. When Christ was here, He submitted to the Father for the purpose of redemption. He had no will of His own. In other words, God was the head of Christ, and Christ is the head of man. In other words, all authority comes from Him.

Now, around the world, you'll find men in authority in the church taking the place of the risen Christ, who is the Head of the body, coming in between, cutting the authority of Christ off. And as such, that portion of the wall is broken down. Because man has authority. The wall was built; it was God's work. The people did it, but it was God's work through prayer. And so headship is very, very important.

[Matthew 28:18-20 NKJV]

¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

As the Head of the body, He's with us. So we always recognize that it isn't man that is in authority, as some denominations have it. They have a head that sometimes those heads have died, and they're in the grave, but they carry the name on.

What about another truth that Paul especially brings before us? And that is that all believers are members of the body. In other words, we need every member of the body. You can't cut off a portion of the body and expect that body to perform the way it should. Even a little cut on a finger—I've got a little gash on my little finger, and believe me, I notice that every time I grab something. There's a little wound. It's so necessary: we need each other. We can't exclude anyone. We're all members of one body, all are necessary, and as such we have different gifts. And those gifts—we need each other's gifts. They're given for the nurturing and the growth of the body.

Here's another one: the Holy Spirit is Christ's representative on the earth. Now that goes somewhat with the headship of Christ, but it goes a little further in the sense that we depend upon the Holy Spirit to develop our gifts. We need the Holy Spirit in our worship. We need

the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us, to lead us into all truth. The Holy Spirit—this is all from the apostles' doctrine. These are building the walls so that the enemy can't come in. If the Holy Spirit is Christ's representative on earth, then man can't take that place. Now, the Roman Catholic Church says the Pope is Christ's representative on the earth. Now, not many other denominations go that far, but some almost make man to be the supreme authority in the church. And as such, as soon as man comes in, then the wall breaks down, and the enemy finds a way in.

Now, here's another church truth, and that is that the church is holy. The church is separated to God. The church belongs to Christ, and it should be sanctified, holy. And therefore, the church is responsible for discipline to make sure that sin does not get into the church, that sin is dealt with. Now, it's not the elders who deal with discipline; it's the whole church. The elders may assist in this, and may take a leading part, but it's the whole church that carries out discipline in the church. So many churches, they have no discipline whatsoever. Such sin goes unchecked, unidentified. And so, in other words, some of the denominations, they don't have any barrier against anyone.

So here's another one of the apostles' doctrine: all believers are priests of God. We call it the priesthood of all believers. Now, in many places, you have a hierarchy. Some places you have bishops who are over certain ones, and then you have the priests, and then you have the laypeople. They make different categories of believers. But the Bible doesn't say anything about that. It says, as a matter of fact, we are all priests. We are holy priests to offer up praise and thanksgiving directly. Every believer can go right into the very presence of the living God and present their prayers, their worship, directly to God. And we are also royal priests. In other words, we have a testimony. We go out and tell others about our risen Lord: a double priesthood of holy and royal priesthood.

There are many principles of gathering and apostolic teaching that build the barrier. And if all these teachings are taught and practiced in real holiness, it will keep out the enemy coming from without, and it will make seclusion where real worship and praise and thanksgiving and fellowship can be enjoyed by those that are inside the local assembly. That's the purpose of building the walls.

One last doctrine that is, I think, very important, especially in these days, is the imminence of the return of Christ for His church. When I say the imminence, that means the immediate return of Jesus. He could come at any moment. It's called the rapture of the church.

[1 Thessalonians 4:17 NKJV]

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

And that could happen at any time. The Bible, as we search it, we find that there are no prophecies yet to be fulfilled before the return of the Lord Jesus Christ—none for His church, that is. There's no prophecies. He could come at any time. We're waiting now for the return of Christ.

But many say—the world says, they laugh and they scoff and they say:

[2 Peter 3:4 NKJV]

and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."

We find that in 2 Peter. "Where is the promise of His coming? For everything remains the same as it has from the beginning of the world. We've been there two thousand years; you say He's coming immediately?" He could come! What this does, brothers and sisters, is it protects us against the idea of laying down our sword and laying down our trowel. We stop building; we stop defending. We say, "Oh, the Lord delays His coming." What the immediate return of the Lord Jesus Christ means to the Christian is it keeps him always focused on heaven from where our Lord is going to come. It's a protection. It's a barrier against lax thinking.

The Brokenness and Prayer of Nehemiah

So as I pondered these questions this week—this question of the importance of the wall, building the wall—we get into Nehemiah in the first chapter. And now some of you had come in a little bit late, and I'll read it again at verses 3 and 4 of Nehemiah chapter 1, if you have a Bible there. I'll just read it for those that came in a little bit late; you'll pardon me, those that are with us from the beginning.

This is Nehemiah questioning his brother who had just come from Judea back to Persia and was visiting Nehemiah in his residence in the capital of Shushan—the capital of Persia at that time. And they came, and he asked them the question: "How are things in Jerusalem with the people?"

[Nehemiah 1:3-4 NKJV]

³ And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire." ⁴ So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

His reaction to the news of the awful condition of God's people and God's city was that he was completely broken down before the Lord, fasting and praying. Now, is that not how we should be today at the ruin of the church? Before we can begin to build, brothers and sisters, we need to really mourn at the condition that we see. We can't say, "Oh, that's them." We can't point fingers at that group over there, and that group over there, and this other group over here. We're all part of the one body, and what affects one affects all.

And so we need, first of all, a very humble spirit like Nehemiah. Before he ever began to have a plan to build, he wept before the very face of God for the people of God and for God's city. And it was there that he prayed for some time—four months. He wept, fasted, and prayed, waited on the Lord, and a plan began to unfold in his mind. Over that time, that was a time of preparation before he even went to look at the city. He prepared it with the tears of his heart, weeping over the condition.

I think that's where we need to go. We don't just pick up the trowel and begin to build. There's too much debris. There's too many enemies. We need the Lord. We need Him to help us.

Now, I've taken a lot of time on this because I felt that it was necessary for us to bring this today as an application that we could make: that indeed the church today needs this, the apostles' doctrine, to be walking in the truth. And the truth is a bulwark. The truth, the psalmist says, is my shield and my help. If every local church would follow the instructions given by the apostles, then the walls would be built, the gates would be functioning, and there would be joy and rejoicing within that local church, just as there will be joy and rejoicing when that wall is dedicated and it's functioning properly, and the gatekeepers are appointed, and the singers are appointed, and the priests are doing their work. They can do it all in safety because the walls have been built.

Well, that's my introduction, and I've taken almost the whole meeting here for an introduction, but trust that we will learn something from this today that might encourage us

moving ahead as we study the details now of how the Lord, through this great man, Nehemiah, reconstructs the walls of Jerusalem.

[Co-speaker]: Maybe just a couple of comments now. One of them is that having heard from Hanani that the walls were down and the gates were burned with fire, Nehemiah weeps and mourns certain days. The question is, why was he surprised? These walls had been possibly broken down in part or in total by Nebuchadnezzar's army eighty, one hundred years earlier, but surely in part they had been restored. The gates had been burned, but probably in part they had been restored, because Nehemiah was surprised. He would have known that there was not much there, but he would have expected that those who went back under Zerubbabel and under Ezra would have done something about it. And in fact, they had maybe done something, but it all came down again.

So a couple of things flow from that. Number one, just because there is a church, as Eric has been saying, doesn't mean to say that the walls are going to be there as they should. And even if they were there yesterday, the argument is not strong that they will be there tomorrow. We must be continually vigilant regarding the walls and the gates.

Now, let me remind you that when you go to Revelation, in chapters 2 and 3, we read about the seven churches, and they were new churches. But interestingly, the Lord commends them for having taken action and, in fact, expelling through the gates those who should not be there. These issues are very important in our day. They're not the only issues—we'll see that later on as we get into Nehemiah. They're not the only issues, but they are introductory issues.

So here we are as an assembly. Our assembly has been around for a long time. What is our responsibility? Well, in many respects, our responsibilities are to rebuild the gates and to rebuild the walls. And sometimes we've got to take, as Eric has suggested, pretty stern action. What about the newcomers? The newcomers have got to say, "I have joined the church." And this is not an "anything goes" organization. It's certainly not an organization of popularity: "And we'll take a vote on it, and the vote will carry." It isn't a question of one or two people being in charge; it's a question of all of the saints getting involved in the same thing. We've all got to be committed to the great truths of Scripture: the singularity of the church and the unity of the church, and make sure that our walls are there, our gates are there. And sometimes the gates have got to be used in both directions. They've got to be used to bring the people in, and they've got to be used, unfortunately, to say to those who aren't following the Lord, "I'm awfully sorry, you can't come in."

So those are my comments on verse 3 and the fact that this issue is not insignificant. It's not at all the complete work of the church, but it's the beginning, as we will find here in the book of Nehemiah.

Confession, Promises, and Petitions

[Main Speaker]: Do you want to carry on, brother, and go into the prayer, or do you want me to carry on here?

[Co-speaker]: You carry on, but I think we should go into the prayer, yes.

[Main Speaker]: Okay. So we read there in verse 4 that he wept and mourned for many days. And we read in the next chapter that it was in the month of Nisan that he had the opportunity then to express his concern to King Artaxerxes. That was four months later, because it was in the month Chislev, which is the ninth month, and then it was in the first month, Nisan. So that makes four months that he prayed to the Lord before he had opportunity to take his need, the needs of Jerusalem, to the only one that could do anything about it.

You see, the children of Israel were in captivity. God had delivered the nation of Israel over to the Gentiles. God had been the King in Israel. His throne was there in the temple. His throne was actually the ark, and the mercy seat was symbolic of the throne of God, and He ruled out of Jerusalem. When the first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, before that actually took place, the Holy Spirit, the Shekinah glory, removed Himself from the temple and went into heaven—very reluctantly; we read that in the opening chapters of the book of Ezekiel.

So now, when God removed His presence from Israel, before the Babylonians sacked the city, tore down the walls, and burned the temple, God then gave over the dominion of the world to the Gentile nations: first Babylon, and then Persia. Now, Nehemiah was one of the captives, and Ezra was one of the captives. Zerubbabel, the early one, was one of the captives. They had been sent back by a succession of kings: first, Zerubbabel, to rebuild the temple; then Ezra was sent back to teach the Word of God to the nation. They could not build the walls on their own. They could only do what the king of Persia told them to do. They had no independent authority to do anything else. And so, Nehemiah needed to go to the king. The king was the only authority that could give him that authority to rebuild the walls.

And so he prayed four months. He prayed every day, fasting, praying. And it began to tell on him. So let's just look at his prayer there for the time that we have left tonight. Verse 5:

[Nehemiah 1:5-6 NKJV]

⁵ And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, ⁶ please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned.

Here we read of his great humility. It's a genuine confession. And he recognizes the unity of the people of God. He doesn't say, "They have done it; they have sinned." He says, "We have sinned." He recognizes that God's people are all one. And so he says, "We have sinned against You, both my father's house and I have sinned."

Real, genuine confession before the Lord always reaches God's ear. God always hears real confession. You remember the sinner that was praying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner"?

[Luke 18:11-13 NKJV]

¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' ¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

And then we have the Lord pointing out a Pharisee who was praying as well—probably a long prayer and a loud prayer, a public prayer. He said, "I'm thankful, God, that I'm not like this publican here." God didn't hear that prayer. But He heard the prayer of that penitent sinner, that publican: "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Now God is going to—His ear is bending low now to Nehemiah. And then in verses 8 and 9, we read there that his prayer shows his faith now in God's promises, and he reminds God of the fact that He had made these promises. Look at this in verses 8 and 9:

[Nehemiah 1:8-9 NKJV]

⁸ Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; ⁹ but if you return to Me,

and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.'

"Remember," he says. He's asking God to remember. That sounds kind of strange, isn't it, to ask God to remember, as if God would forget? But he says, "Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses." And, of course, he's referring to a couple of places there. One, we could go to Leviticus chapter 26. Leviticus chapter 26, verse 27, where He talks about this. It's too long a portion, but really what He's saying there in verse 27:

[Leviticus 26:27-29 NKJV]

²⁷ "And after all this, if you do not obey Me, but walk contrary to Me, ²⁸ then I also will walk contrary to you in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins. ²⁹ You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters.

[Leviticus 26:31 NKJV]

I will lay your cities waste and bring your sanctuaries to desolation, and I will not smell the fragrance of your sweet aromas.

[Leviticus 26:34 NKJV]

Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate and you are in your enemies' land; then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbaths.

He talks there in verse 34 that the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate and you are in your enemies' land. But then in verse 40, He says—and this is what Nehemiah is referring to, because all those things had happened. They disobeyed the Lord. He had brought their enemies against them. He had burned their palaces and their temple with fire, broken down their walls, and the land had lain desolate for seventy years. And there they were in the land of captivity.

Verse 40, we read about His mercy and grace:

[Leviticus 26:40-42 NKJV]

⁴⁰ "But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked

contrary to Me, ⁴¹ and that I also have walked contrary to them and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they accept their guilt-- ⁴² then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land.

And then He says that He will not cast them away:

[Leviticus 26:44-45 NKJV]

⁴⁴ Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor shall I abhor them, to utterly destroy them and break My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. ⁴⁵ But for their sake I will remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD."

And so what Nehemiah does here in verses 8 and 9 of Nehemiah chapter 1, he reminds the Lord of what had taken place. Now, isn't this also a lesson for us in our prayer life? People sometimes say, "How can we pray?" And one of the ways that we can pray is that we take a promise of God and pray that promise. Say, "Lord, remember You said that if..." and so on. And you can say, "Lord, You made that promise. Fulfill that, Lord." And so that's what Nehemiah is doing. He says, "Lord, You said that You'd take us away and put us into a strange land, but if we turned, we humbled ourselves and prayed, You would bring us back." And that's exactly what his prayer was like: he reminded God of His promises.

And so we can too. We can use God's promises. Now, how many promises are there in the Bible? Anybody got any idea? Sebastian's smiling; he probably has a clue. You got an answer? How many? I don't know—would you say there were thousands? Yeah, I think so. I think there's a promise for every problem. I believe so.

Verses 8 and 9, he reminds God of His promises to bring them back. And then in verse 10, now he reminds the Lord of whose people the children of Israel are: they're His people, right?

[Nehemiah 1:10 NKJV]

Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand.

Isn't that lovely? When we pray for the Lord's people, we can remind the Lord and say, "Lord, this is one of Your children we're praying for. You love Your children, Lord."

And then verse 11, he further now pleads for grace and help in the sight of the man that he is going to ask this favor of:

[Nehemiah 1:11 NKJV]

O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." For I was the king's cupbearer.

"To the prayer of Your servants"—he wasn't alone in this prayer meeting; he prayed with others. That's a lovely thing, isn't it? We're always encouraged when we come to the prayer meeting. We pray when we're alone at home, but we're always encouraged when we pray with others. We hear others' prayers as well; there's great encouragement. And so these ones, he says, who desire to fear Your name, "and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Already, he had a plan. Over that four-month period of waiting on the Lord, a plan was coming into his mind, and he was just waiting for an opportunity, an opening. And it comes then in the next chapter. But notice this: he doesn't say, "I pray, grant him mercy in the sight of the great King Artaxerxes." He recognizes that Artaxerxes was just a man. And he was—he was just a man, a man whom God could put His hand upon. Now, Artaxerxes was a great king, a powerful king, but he was just a man. And in God's hands, he is an instrument.

And so Nehemiah prays, and then it says, "For I was the king's cupbearer." He had access to the king. Now, we think of a cupbearer as just sort of like a butler, you know, bringing the tea or coffee to the boss. But a cupbearer in the ancient times was a very highly exalted position. You had the king's ear. You were a trusted counselor to the king if you were his cupbearer. Remember Pharaoh's cupbearer? He was raised to his position again because he occupied a

very high position in those ancient times. So he had the king's ear. And he just needed the Lord's timing to be able to enact it. And I guess that will be in chapter 2.

Harold, I left you very little time.

[Harold Summers]: There are a few points there that I would comment on. I won't get to them all, but I go back to verse number 6:

[Nehemiah 1:6 NKJV]

please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned.

And I sit back and say, what's his father's house got to do with it? Interestingly, the man who raised this issue in the first place was Hanani. And it was quite possible that he had gone back to Jerusalem in the earlier restorations. Nehemiah is saying, "I'm not alone in this, but my family are involved." And I rejoice that the Lord is a family person. Nehemiah says my family are guilty, and very often in Scripture, we read that my family rejoiced at the blessings that God brings them into. We don't live independently. And somehow I think that there's an extra impetus in the prayer and zeal of Nehemiah because of his brother and others. And he's saying, "Lord, we're not all innocent; we've all committed sins. We're all guilty." But he's praying with his family and for his family. And I get great encouragement from that. Our God loves families.

So that's maybe, in light of time, about as far as we will go this evening. Maybe some more comments on the last couple of verses next time, Rob.

[Main Speaker]: Very good. Thank you. Would you just close in prayer then, Harold, please? I think our time is gone.

[Harold Summers]: We're thankful for Scripture. You tell us stories, and we're thankful for that because we not only find stories interesting, but frankly, they're a lot easier to remember than dictation. And, Lord, we thank You for this story. We thank You for these men: Hanani, bold enough to go back to Nehemiah with the problem, and Nehemiah bold enough to listen, to understand, and to say, "Maybe the Lord has raised me for this purpose. Maybe I could do something." We thank You for his patience. We thank You for his planning. We thank You for the grace of God upon him in all aspects.

Lord, we thank You that we could try to be like him. We want to be like all the other great men of God in Scripture, Lord. We want to be like the Lord Jesus. We thank You that Your ultimate purpose is to make us like our blessed Savior. We pray that we will grow along the way.

And so thanks for the story of Nehemiah. And thank You for the importance of rebuilding walls and rebuilding gates. And Lord, all the rest is going to follow, because this is not the only thing that Nehemiah had in mind, but he started there, and we're thankful for that. Lord, may we be faithful. And may we be, as Vic has suggested, may we take these truths to our own personal lives and build walls and gates in our own personal lives: that that which is wrong be kept out, that that which is right be allowed in, and that which is wrong and in be expelled. We'd like that, Lord. We want the same for the assembly. And we pray that You'll just teach us and bless us.

Lord, we're entering a new week, and we pray that You will bless in all the meetings that will flow this week. Pray especially for the blessings on Tuesday and for the blessing of God upon the Bone family as they will be having a memorial for their mother on Wednesday. Bless them, Lord. We believe some of them don't know the Lord as Savior; we pray that they'll get saved, Lord. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.