

'TEAR DOWN and BUILD UP'

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- [0 : 0 0] This is a picture of Hadrian's Wall. Carol and I had an enjoyable break earlier this month. It was a defensive wall. It was like a castle within a straight line.
- The wall on that wall, you can see its ownings were so high. The original wall, when it was standing, you see this wooden thing behind me? I hope it's got a name. The sounding board.
- The wall would have originally been as high as that. All the way from coast to coast, 73 miles. And it would have been even higher than that, because that would be the bit the soldiers used to stand on.
- And they'd have had a bit more walls still to protect them. So it was a huge thing. And miles and miles and miles and miles of it. From one coast to the other.
- And it was the northern front of the Roman Empire. And I'll talk a little bit more about it later. But as you can see, it's mostly gone now. And this is probably the best reserved bit.
- [1 : 2 6] There's bits of wall that are still up to right on the Cobra, up to about eight feet high. But most of it, when you're there, you can see the foundations that are about so high. And in a lot of other places, if you look at the map, it says this is where the wall used to be.
- Or there's a dry stone wall made up. You know, all the dry stone walls in the area, I think they made up of Roman stones. They were people in Cycle. But it used to be a protective wall to keep the people who lived to the north.
- Us now, out. And the Roman Empire in. But eventually it became a trading line. There were lots of gates in the wall so that people could come in and out and trade.
- And it got me thinking. As we were walking along here, we walked about 20 or 30 miles a bit. And of the people that used to live there and how like us they were.
- Sometimes we think about the Romans and we see people wearing strange army uniforms. They're going around in tows. What's units? They're looking very different to us. And of course, the Romans were around at the same time as the events we read about in the New Testament.
- [2 : 3 9] Actually, some of the soldiers who served on the war came from the eastern end of the Roman Empire. So their families would have been around about the same sort of time that Paul was going around preaching the Gospel.
- The third we read in Acts. And one of the settlements just at the back of the wall, they made some remarkable discoveries not so long ago where they dug up a whole lot of letters that the soldiers had been writing and receiving to their families back home a couple of thousand miles away.
- And those letters really bring those soldiers to life in how like us they were. It was very much letters home to mum and full of things like the state of the food. And thank you for the socks. It's cold and wet up here.
- Please send us some more socks. We really appreciate them. But they were the sort of messages that we would send in emails and texts today, keeping in touch with people when they were far from home.

And they were just the same sort of things that we would write about today. And sometimes when we read the Bible, it's easy for us to think somehow these people were different to us.

[3 : 47] And when you read the letters and to look at the things that they were getting up to and enjoying and worrying about, how like us they were. And sometimes it's helpful to remember that when we read the Bible.

So the people when we read about the Bible are just like us. We enjoyed our walking holiday. And the day we got home, I was reading a friend's daily blog.

It was a daily devotional blog. And his theme was Borders. And that was based on the 80th anniversary of the day, which had also been that week.

The other thing that week was it was during the trial of the two guys that cut down the signal tree and the signal tree gap. And it seemed very strange to be walking the ball, then going back to where we were staying, putting the news on television, and seeing where we'd just been walking on the news, which seems to have come up every day we were there.

So that and the 80th anniversary of the day, my friend Tom said, I reflected on the need to pull down the walls that divide us. I thought, oh, here we go again. Walls, more walls.

[4 : 52] And focus more on living peaceably with one another. I return to the borders we continue to create between us. And of course, when Hayden's wall was put up, it was primarily put up as a barrier.

That got me thinking, the idea got me thinking, about walls in the Bible. And if you look at borders and boundaries, they mostly cover who owns what, and it's all about keeping others out.

But when you look at the way that the Bible speaks of walls, there's actually quite a lot there, and it's a lot more meaningful. And it really sort of breaks into two completely different approaches to walls, as being a bad thing and as being a good thing.

So see which heart of the sermon speaks to you most. Shall we just pray together? Lord, as we look into your word, and we look at the theme of walls, we pray that you would build us up, that you would encourage us in our walk and our relationship with you, through your word, and through Jesus our Lord.

Amen. Well, first of all, the walls can be a thoroughly bad thing. They can be divisive. We talk about putting up walls and barriers between us.

[6 : 08] They can be divisive, they can isolate us, and they are a source of ignorance. As I was saying earlier, Hadrian's wall, when it stood, was 15 feet or high, plus a parapet beyond it.

If you think in terms of the sailing wall behind you, and think of that direction, 73 miles along, what an imposing thing it was, and what a barrier it was. And only the guards who were actually on duty on top of the wall would be able to see in all directions.

The motive behind building a wall is usually to keep people out. It feeds on fear, and it stokes ignorance because you don't know what's going on on the other side of the wall.

We're this side, and we don't care about them. And one of the things that was on the news articles about the VE Day was a lady who was reminiscing about how she was a singer in the immediate post-war period.

And she'd gone on a tour of Germany, I think in about 1945, 1946, just up at the end of the hostilities. And she described how they were travelling across Germany in a coach, and she said, how silly we were. We used to look out of the window at the locals and put out our tongues at them, and jeer at them, because they were Germans.

[7 : 30] And there was that sort of not understanding what they were like or the people. And she went on to say, when we arrived where we were going to get the concert, and we actually got to meet them, we were shocked. We realised that they were people just like us.

Whenever we think about the Romans 2,000 years ago, we can sometimes think people are different to ourselves. When we get to know them, we found how reliable they are. But that dividing wall of hostility is the wall at its worst, the wall as a barrier.

And this is the part of our reading from Ephesians 2. And in verse 14, it says, He himself is our peace, who has made the two, that division, one, and has destroyed the barrack, the dividing wall of hostility.

Paul is writing to a mostly Gentile church, and he is acknowledging the exclusion that they had experienced, that the Jewish community really saw them as inferior, didn't want to know about them.

We are God's people, you aren't. And there was that war of hostility between them. And Paul, through this passage, speaks about how you used to be described as the unsurven sides.

[8 : 48] You were unclean, you were inferior, you didn't matter, God wasn't interested in you. Verse 12, you were excluded from citizenship in Israel, you were foreigners to the covenants of the promise.

You were without hope and without God in the world. You are very much on the other side of the wall, and we don't care about you. And this is the difference that Jesus had brought.

That through his suffering, through his redemptive dying, through his blood shed on the cross, he had torn down that wall, that barrier was removed, and he had resolved that.

Verse 14, he himself is our peace, who has made the two, one, and has destroyed that barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

Jesus' position on this is clear. The wall has been taken down. It no longer counts. It is no longer valid. There is no barrier between us, because Jesus swore it down.

[9 : 52] And today, when we walk in the wall, if you want a good long walk in an interesting and mild place, the wall has gone, most of us, and you can see over it, and you can enjoy the views.

And there are some stunning, spectacular views as you walk along it. 360 degrees, the wall is no longer a barrier. It is in the way of the view. It doesn't stop you travelling or crossing anymore, because it has been torn down, it has been levelled.

You can enjoy the view. And so too, in Christ, that barrier is gone. There is no longer any distinction in the church between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, but we are all one in Christ, Paul says.

And he says that in several of his letters. There are no barriers between us, and we shouldn't pretend that there are barriers up either. In Christ, they no longer exist.

The barrier between us, whatever it is, has been taken down by the redemptive death of Christ. And the barrier between us all, and God, is also gone as well.

[11 : 04] There is no longer a barrier of sin between humanity and its creator. The Lord God, through Jesus, has removed that barrier too. And again, there is no distinction in how we can come to know God, how we can be citizens of His kingdom, because Jesus has taken that wall down too.

We can all know God in exactly the same way through faith in Christ, and what He has done for us. And so, there is a very simple message here, that walls are a bad thing.

And walls of division, barriers of division, are torn down by Jesus. And if there is any dividing wall in your heart, the call is to let Jesus demolish that too.

That there are no barriers between you and other people, and no barriers between you and the Father, through Jesus and what He has done. This is such a powerful passage in Ephesians 2.

It is so Christ-centered. It is so full of Jesus, and what He has done for us, and what He means to us, and the difference that makes in our lives. And if you have any experience of barriers and walls in your life, there is a call here to let Jesus demolish them.

[12 : 25] Because that is the message of Ephesians 2. Walls are a bad thing. Jesus tears them down. But there is another strand in Scripture as well, which speaks to them in a very different way, and speaks to them as a good thing.

Because walls are symbols, speaking about other things, and we can use symbols in more than one way. And there are other passages in Scripture which speak about the good things about walls, and the things that they can do for us.

And in that respect, we can celebrate them and we can welcome them, because they are no longer being viewed as barriers, causes of hostility and division. And if you look in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 26 and 1 Samuel 25, we find that walls are used to represent protection and security.

There are things that we feel safe behind, safe inside of. And Israel at the time was being warned against trusting in its city walls instead of the wall.

But the symbolism of the protection the walls provided remained. In those days, wall protection, if you had a town of any size, you would secure it by building a wall around it, so that robbers and enemies couldn't just come in and pour a town.

[13 : 54] They were safe places to be. They were symbolic of the protection that the Lord gives his people. I will be a wall around you.

The danger came when Israel put his trust in the physical stone walls as opposed to the protection, the real protection that the Lord gave. And so in Isaiah 26 verse 1, Isaiah prophesied salvation for all the people.

And he uses strong walls as a stool wall of the safety and security and the protection that God gives. He says, in that day, this song will be sung in Judah.

We have a strong city because God makes salvation its walls and ramparts. We are not just safe because we have got a brick or a stone wall around us.

We are safe and secure because God has put salvation around us. And that is even more and even better. In 1 Samuel 25, we are reading about David where he is on the run from Saul.

[15 : 02] He is living a sort of robbing hood existence. And his men count close by a guy called Nabal who is a local landowner in Shefford. And David is a good man.

His men behave themselves. And they act as a protective influence in the area. Nabal is a bit of a, well, he is not the best of characters.

And he thinks the worst of other people. And he suspects that David is somehow going to do harm. And he wants David out. He doesn't trust him. He is suspicious of him. And in this passage, Nabal shepherds are saying, look, don't stir things up with David.

He is on our side. He is okay. He has been looking after us. And they describe him in this way as being like a human wall, protecting foolish Nabal's plots.

Night and day, they say, they were on the wall around us the whole time we were herding our sheep near them. And don't worry about David. When he and his men are packed out next door, they will up the wall.

[16 : 07] We felt safe with them around. So, the Old Testament uses walls, and in a good way as well, as representing protection and security. They say, look, yes, security really needs to be in the wall.

There are other passages in the Old Testament as well, and in the New, where walls become symbols of human glory and God's glory. Because they are a source of physical safety, they also became symbolic of blessing, physical blessing and spiritual blessing.

And so, in 2 Chronicles 14 verse 7, Godly King Asa, one of the good kings of the time, saw their ability to build up his towns and cities as a sign of God's blessing.

God has given us peace. We can develop. We can expand. We can prosper. And so, reading from 2 Chronicles 14, Asa writes, let us build up these towns and put walls around them with towers, gates, and baths.

The land is still ours because we have sought the Lord our God. We sought him, and he's given us rest on every side. So they built and prospered.

[17 : 22] And you've got this sort of picture of peace and prosperity in the land at the time. But Asa is saying, look, we're able to build things up and develop things and prosper because the Lord has looked after us and he has blessed us.

And he sees these things, this material prosperity, as a sign of God's protection and blessing. We find the opposite a little bit later in Israel's history when we come to what is a much better known passage in Nehemiah, where after Jerusalem has been invaded and conquered and demolished and torn down, and the people have been taken into captivity into the Babylonian Empire.

And then 70 years later, the promise that God made to the prophets that they would be allowed to come back begins to come true. And the Jews begin to return and to rebuild.

And it all begins to happen and God's kept his prophecies and isn't it wonderful, but then it all storms. And the rebuilding and the reconstruction and the restoration were right to a halt because there's low opposition and there's difficulties.

And all the initial hope and promise that things were really going to work out well falls flat. And word comes back to Babylon and Nehemiah, who is a royal servant, hears the news and he is distraught with it.

[18 : 52] And Nehemiah, chapter 1, verse 3, is that point where Nehemiah hears this news and he grieves over the broken walls of Jerusalem as a mark of desire.

They said to me, those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire.

And Nehemiah sees the state of the walls as a mark of disgrace. Symbols of human glory or lack of it.

But also symbols of divine glory. And we have a second reading from Revelation, chapter 21, which speaks about the new Jerusalem, this beautiful city of God, and its amazing walls.

I'll just read past it again. It had a great high wall with twelve gates and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.

[19 : 55] Three on the east, three on the north, three on the south, and three on the west. And this is actually fulfilled of a prophecy that had already been given. And you can read that in Ezekiel 48, verse 31.

It's exactly the same prophecy. The new Jerusalem perfectly filled with these gates representing the twelve tribes of Israel. But Revelation goes on further.

It says, the walls of the city had twelve foundations. And on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the land. So this is Ezekiel's prophecy about the new Jerusalem with the apostles added on.

And the walls symbolized the twelve apostles. And again, you have this picture of the new Jerusalem, its gates and its walls as a sign of the glory of God.

The walls can also represent being built together. There's a couple more passages here. And one from 1 Peter 2 and one from Ephesians 2. And this is more than just the walls.

[21 : 00] It's about buildings in general. It's difficult to build a building without walls, isn't it? We're perhaps familiar with the image in 1 Peter 2, verse 5, where God's people, as the scribes, being built together into a living temple.

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

That sense that every believer is like a brick in this wall of praise, this temple to God. One of the remarkable things about aliens' walls, which you'll not get from that slide, is that every single stone on the outside is being cut and squared off.

They all fit together like bricks, not just random stones. They are amazing. And how many millions of them there must be. And Peter is making the same point, that we too are being cut and shaped and built together into a household of praise.

And we get that full circle back to Ephesians 2. Because later on, when we read that passage, first of all, the bit about the divine wall of hostility being taken down, but then Paul goes on to say, consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.

[22 : 21] And here we've got Revelation again, even before Revelation is written, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. With Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

In him, a whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. We've got this beautiful picture in Ezekiel, in Peter's letters, in Paul's letters, and in Revelation finally.

All saying the same thing, that God's people are compared to living stones being built together on the foundation of the apostles, into this wonderful building, this wonderful structure of the Lord's.

Walls representing being built together. So, there's more, but I'm going to stop there.

But, I'm just going to read one more passage from Isaiah 60, that speaks a little bit further about this wonderful building. It says in both Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21, that the gates never, ever close.

[23 : 31] Your gates will always stand open. You will never be shut, day or night, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations, their kings led in triumphal procession.

Isaiah and Revelation again, confirming there. So, walls are the bad thing. If you've got barriers in your life, Jesus wants to take them down. Walls are the good thing.

If you belong to Jesus, God wants to build you together as a living temple, his living city. And in that respect, walls are no longer about barriers.

The walls are the gateways to the glory of God. We can rejoice together that the barrier walls are gone. Between us and God. Between us and one another.

We can rejoice equally in Jesus as our living security. And in our place, in that living wall that Isaiah, Ezekiel, John, Peter and Paul, all alive, pointed towards.

[24 : 36] For that is our intended future. Amen.