

Keep Calm and Carry On Pt 4 – Rebuild the Wall

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Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Bible Text: Nehemiah 4

Preached on: Sunday, February 14, 2021

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Turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Nehemiah in chapter 1. This is the fourth week in a series that is basically a bridge to get us back into a study we were doing that we stepped away from last summer. We were working our way through the books of Ezra-Nehemiah and we had gotten through the fourth chapter of Nehemiah when we took a break and spent the last half of last year doing some other things related to what we had been seeing, and so we're going back into Nehemiah and I wanted to take some time to bridge that and get us back into the context so that we started looking at that a few weeks back and I think this passage, these two books are so relevant to today. I've titled the messages "Keep Calm and Carry On." Keep calm and carry on. I borrowed that title, and so the title of the message today again is "Keep Calm and Carry On Part 4," and subtitle, "Rebuild the Walls." I borrowed that title from the pages of history, particularly the history of World War II and when the German army was preparing to invade Great Britain in 1940 and they unleashed the preparation for that in the Blitz, the bombing, the relentless bombing of England, London, other cities, population centers, as well as the industrial complex, soften England for the invasion of the German army. And so every day, or every night, the bombers would come night after night from Germany, dropping their payload all over England and every night the people would scurry into the bomb shelters and come out aware that things had been hit, things had been destroyed, but not fully aware of how great the damage was until the next day when the light of the sun revealed the broken-down buildings, the ash and the rubble. And so the phrase that was used then was what we need to do is keep calm and carry on. What are we to do? We're to keep calm and carry on. We just get up, stay calm, and we keep at the work, and that's what the British did and they experienced that eight months of relentless night after night bombing and they stood up under it until the Germans finally realized that they needed to turn in a different direction, they invaded Russia. And so keep calm and carry on was successful.

So I've shared that it seems so relevant, that phrase, that exhortation is so relevant for our day because of the circumstances we live in as Christians in our country at this time in history when we see so much that distresses us, and we can feel like that we are being victims of the Blitz, a moral, political, spiritual blitz where the culture is becoming more hostile, the social pressure, the political forces, the cultural opposition to truth and particularly to the gospel is growing, and we see this coming as waves, the same way the

waves of bombers came over England. It seems to come in waves where now just the simple evangelistic message of the gospel, particularly if you happen to be evangelizing someone who would be homosexual or transgendered and you tell them that the message of the Scripture is that God had made them male and female, that he makes you the gender that you are, that we don't determine that. And we know that many people believe that you can determine that but, no, the Bible is real clear on that. God made them male and female from the beginning as Jesus said in Matthew 19. God formed you in your mother's womb so your biological sex is your sex. You may not feel like that. We understand, you may be having tremendous inner anguish and we want to be compassionate and sympathetic to understand that but, listen, the way to freedom is to put yourself under the authority of God. And to say that, though, is considered hate speech. To say that, I mean, I heard recently that in Australia now you can be put in jail for that, that conversation, but that's just simply preaching the truth of the Bible, that is simply...and listen, the answer is in that anguish that the person is experiencing, we know of a Savior who can deliver you. His name is Jesus. You can't overcome the anguish that you have and the confusion that you have. None of us can, we all stand equally in need of grace and we can say to that person who's struggling, "Listen, if you knew my heart, you would know the anguish and struggles I have, maybe in different ways but profound difficulty and I have found in Christ a worthy and able Savior. He can change you from the inside out." And that is the message of liberty and freedom.

That is the message every lost soul needs to hear, but yet we live in a culture in which that message is despised with a new level of intensity. Maybe not a new level of intensity, a more obvious and open hostility because the hostility has always been there to the gospel, but the openness of it, the hatred of it is now more clear and more obvious. And so as we as Christians look at the world around us and we see the moral decline, the spiritual darkness, the mental confusion, the emotional distress, intensity, hatred, we can feel like what can we do? And the message from the word of God, from Ezra-Nehemiah, is very relevant today because they also lived in times of political turmoil, social upheaval, spiritual resistance and opposition, moral decay, and God gave them a blueprint but it can be summarized in that, it agrees with that slogan, "Keep calm and carry on."

And so we began looking at this four weeks ago, and if you didn't hear those messages, I encourage you to listen to those but simply to review quickly. Keep calm because God, there's nothing new about this really. It's new to us but it's not new in history. It's exactly what Ezra and Nehemiah, the circumstances in which they ministered, just like the day that we live in. The people of God in that day had every bit the same challenges of spiritual nature that we have. There's nothing new under the sun so this is normal, so keep calm. And not only that, God is sovereign. He reigns. He rules. He's overseeing all of this. Even though Satan's at work and evil is at work, God is sovereign and allowing only that which will fulfill his ultimate purposes, so keep calm. That's what we looked at several weeks ago, and then we began looking at carry on, and the beauty of Ezra-Nehemiah is, it gives us in three main points of the book the three things that we should be doing actively in the midst of these circumstances. You look around and you can say, "What can we do? How should we live?" Now there may be things that we need to do,

you know, as citizens, there may be conversations we need to have, but this is the main work. Ezra-Nehemiah lays out for us the main work.

Keep calm and carry on and do these three things, and the beauty of what God did in this is Ezra-Nehemiah, we believe it's one book in the original. The Hebrew Bible had one book, Ezra-Nehemiah. The English Bible breaks it into two. But we think it's unified in its theme and its message, and basically the way that we see that is in the fact that Ezra-Nehemiah records for us the return of the people of God, the people of Israel from the Babylonian captivity, the return from Babylon to Jerusalem, and it records for us their return and then the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and in that we're going to see there's basically three parts. We talked about this in previous weeks. There are three returns. It's really quite interesting that the Lord did it this way, that, "Why didn't You do it all at once? Couldn't we have done a better job of planning?" I mean, if you were going on vacation, do you want to make three trips to get there? You know, you drive from here to the beach and you realize you don't have something, nobody would do this but just work with me on this for a moment, you drive all the way home and then you come back again and then you realize, "Oh, we still forgot some stuff," and you drive all the way home and you come back again. That doesn't seem to make sense, does it? It's better to plan well and most of us would probably go buy something that we forgot anyway, right? But again, you can't do that for some reason and so you have to go back three times. No. No one would do that.

Well, did the Lord not plan well? Did he not get everything together? Did he not have all the resources that he needed to make one return effective? Well, obviously he had all the resources but he chose to do it this way. And so these three returns, the first return in 538 BC under Zerubbabel, a large number of Jews return and their commission is to rebuild the temple and so that's their work, and the first six chapters of Ezra deal with this first return, and so the rebuilding of the temple. So there's a sense in which the people of God, what were they to do? How did they carry on? What did it mean to carry on? It meant rebuild the temple and that has application for us. The second return happened 80 years later in 458 under Ezra, the namesake of the first part of this book. Ezra returns again with a large number of Jews and this time the commission is to restore the law of God to its rightful place in worship and among the people of God, to preach the word, to bring the word of God to bear, that if the worship is going to be right, if the temple is going to be doing everything it needs to be, the word of God must be there. So the Lord breaks this up so that we can see the incredible importance of each of these things. It's kind of like, well, it's like a three-legged stool. If you have a three-legged stool and you lose one leg, how good is your stool? Or if you forget to put one leg on? You sit on that stool, you're going to be on the ground. And so we come today to the third leg of the stool. The third return under Nehemiah was 13 years after the second return. 458 was the second return, 538 the first return, 80 years later 458, 13 years later 445 BC. The third return under Nehemiah and the purpose of this is to rebuild the walls.

And so today keep calm and carry on, rebuild the walls, and these three things are each a part of what God is calling us to do. To rebuild the temple, we said the application to that today is not for us to build physical buildings but it is to build the temple of God as the

New Testament makes clear. The Old Testament temple was a type of Christ and then his body, and we are the temple of God, 1 Corinthians 3:15, Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:1-5. You are stones, Peter says in 1 Peter 2. You're living stones being built into a spiritual house on the foundation of Christ to offer up sacrifices. He says the believer in the local church is a living stone being built into a spiritual house for God's glory, so that the temple typified the church, and so we build the church and we make it a place of worship. It's all about worship. We help one another to truly worship God. That's what it's about. And so that was teaching them, listen, what matters more than anything else, even as the world is falling apart around you, even as they lived under Persian hegemony, the reign of an oppressive evil regime, godless rulers, surrounded by peoples that opposed their work, that hated God, that hated them because they hated God and they belonged to God, and the first thing is we must devote our lives to worship in the midst of this dark world. That's our calling.

The second leg of the stool, the second return, Ezra, the only way that we can devote our lives to worship and truly worship God is we must have the word of God as our foundation, our certain and sure foundation, and so the word of God must be brought to bear in all of the ways that we worship corporately and in our lives, that we would offer lives of worship to God. Their deal was to do that as well, to bring the law of God, and for us the application is to build the temple, the spiritual temple, to help one another be true worshipers. How can you do that without the word of God?

And the third leg of the stool, though, is also essential. So the Lord allows that there needs to be a third return under Nehemiah and the purpose of that return is to rebuild the walls, and what we're going to see is to rebuild the walls doesn't mean that we're to be about building walls and we're going to start some wall-building outside. No, our wall-building happens in our lives. It's a spiritual, again a type. The walls of Jerusalem are a picture of what separates the people of God from the surrounding nations, what separates the people of God today from unbelievers. The walls of Jerusalem are those things, building the walls is to be pursuing holiness, to be helping one another to truly apply the gospel and be changed by the power of God on a daily basis. Though we still struggle with sin, though that struggle will not end until death or Jesus returns, we are called not merely just to gather for worship, not merely to celebrate the word of God, we are called to be doers of the word and to be helping one another to seek purity, and if that is not a part of what we are, then we are like a two-legged stool, we're of no value. All three of these things are essential.

So keep calm and carry on. Be about these three things, and today be about this third essential leg of the stool, rebuild the walls. So let's read the first four verses of Nehemiah 1 and we'll be moving around in some other places in Scripture as we go.

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "The remnant there in

the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." 4 When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we come to You this morning asking that You might give us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts that are receptive, good soil for Your word, and that You might send forth Your word and lead us, Lord, to Your holy hill, to the place of Your habitation, to the place where Your glory dwells. Help us be people who because of our awe and wonder at the love of Christ earnestly, zealously desire to be like Him by His grace and for His glory. Amen.

So keep calm and carry on, rebuild the walls. I want us to consider this, the importance of what it means to rebuild the walls under three points this morning. I want to try to help us see how this is attested in the word so that you can see this is really flowing out of the Scriptures, the application of this is what God is calling us to as we read the Scriptures, and I want us, the first point I wanted to share with you this morning is the supreme importance of the city of God. The supreme importance of the city of God, and what we're going to do in each of the three points this morning is there's going to be an A and a B, and the A is going to be then and the B is going to be now. We're going to talk about what the Scripture is talking about then, and then we're going to talk about how that applies to us now, okay?

So the supreme importance of the city of God we're going to consider under those two subpoints, then and now. The supreme importance of the city of God is seen as Nehemiah asks about it, hears the report, and then responds to the report. When he hears that the people are in great distress and reproach, the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, its gates are burned with fire, he sits down, weeps and mourns for days. This sent him into a profound depression, spiritual mourning. To hear this report brought such profound grief that Nehemiah was essentially immobilized and then in his grief he prays and then God mobilizes him to deal with it. Why is it such a big deal to Nehemiah? I mean, Jerusalem, okay, can we not just have another city? So Jerusalem's a mess, how is Bethel or is there another town, you know, things are going well, maybe we can kind of relocate things? No, Nehemiah understands because he is a student of Scripture himself, he understands the supreme importance of the city of God and the city of God in the Old Testament under the old covenant is the physical location of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the city of God. Jerusalem is also the city of David. Sometimes we get confused by that because we think of Bethlehem as the city of David. Bethlehem was the city of David's origin but the city of David according to the Scriptures over and over and over again is Jerusalem, and it's called the city of David because David conquered Jerusalem. One of the areas in Canaan that was not conquered under Joshua in subsequent years was Jerusalem, Mount Zion actually, which was a fortified hill, a mountain that we now know as Jerusalem. The Jebusites dwelled in Jerusalem and David

under the power of the Holy Spirit, he took that land for God. God had wanted it taken before and in his providence he waited until David came and David came and took that land, and therefore Jerusalem was called the city of David. And Jerusalem, then, in the providence of God as he's unveiling his plan of salvation progressively from Genesis all the way through the Old Testament into the New, he's teaching us through some wonderful and glorious types.

The nature of progressive revelation, the Bible is progressive, that is, it builds on itself. He starts with simple things and he keeps building and themes that you see in Genesis continue to be expanded upon. This is one of the reasons that I've been teaching on Genesis 1 to 11 on Wednesday nights and I've called that series foundations for living, because that's the foundation of the whole Bible, Genesis 1 to 11. And you find so many doctrines starting. It's like little, you know, a mighty river like the Mississippi, I remember seeing some years ago a picture of the headwaters of the Mississippi in Minnesota. There was a picture that I saw online. I wish I could actually see it in person, but maybe one day, that you could jump over the Mississippi River. You know, with a good running start, jump over it. Try that in Memphis.

So this tiny spring becomes a mighty river, that's what we see in Scripture, these tiny springs of doctrine become mighty rivers of doctrine as you go through the Scriptures, and as you trace them rightly and you travel rightly along them, you are enriched to see the glory and beauty of God's truth, how marvelous it is. And one of these truths that the Lord unpacks for us is in the place where God dwells, which is really the central problem in the Bible is how can sinners like you and me come to be reconciled to God and dwell in his presence, because the reality is, according to Scripture, you and I were created for the presence of God. We were made to behold him face-to-face and to worship him in his presence, and the most fundamentally delightful thing a human soul can do is to see the glory of God and worship him. Now the problem is sin has radically wrecked that so that in truth when you came into this world, just like me, you came in hating God and so we need a heart change. And so the Lord is teaching these things as we go through the Scriptures but part of what he's teaching us is what does it look like to dwell with God. How do you come to meet God? How do you come to know God and dwell in his presence? And part of this is being answered in this typology of the city of God, Jerusalem, the place where God dwells, because that's the significance of Jerusalem. David took the city from the Jebusites, the walled city, and God then wanted his temple put in Jerusalem, and the temple of God which was built not by David but by the son of David, Solomon, the temple of God was to be God's footstool and the place where his glory personally meets the world and where sinners personally experienced his presence at that time in history.

Now progressively he's revealing, the stream is getting broader. In the New Testament it's going to become the Mississippi River and we see that Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple, and that if you come to know Jesus and you by faith put your trust in him and you have an encounter with him, he's your Master and your Lord, now you dwell with God, God dwells in you, nothing can change that, and then the wonder of it is that Jesus returns to heaven, then his body is called the temple because all of us, all of you belong to Jesus,

he dwells in you, and when we gather together, there's a sense in which he blesses with his presence even more. "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in their midst." Now that's talking in particular about church discipline but it's true that he dwells and inhabits the praises of his people. So Jerusalem at that point in time was the place where God had chosen to meet man and therefore what you see in the Old Testament is the beauty of Jerusalem. The supreme importance of the city of God.

Turn with me to Psalm 48. You can do a search, Mount Zion occurs like 62 times in the Bible starting in 2 Samuel 5 when David takes Mount Zion, the first time it occurs. It's not talked about in creation. It's not talked about in the Pentateuch except that Abraham goes and offers Isaac, Mount Moriah, which we believe later is associated with Mount Zion somehow in the vicinity of Mount Zion. But the word Mount Zion doesn't occur until 2 Samuel 5 but then it becomes a refrain throughout the Psalms and throughout the prophets and it is a picture of the glorious city of God.

Look with me at Psalm 48:1-3, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, In the city of our God, His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion in the far north, The city of the great King. God, in her palaces, Has made Himself known as a stronghold." You see, the reason Mount Zion is beautiful is because it's the city of God where God makes himself known.

He goes on to say in verse 8, "As we have heard, so have we seen In the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God; God will establish her forever. We have thought on Your lovingkindness, O God, In the midst of Your temple. As is Your name, O God, So is Your praise to the ends of the earth; Your right hand is full of righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad, Let the daughters of Judah rejoice Because of Your judgments. Walk about Zion and go around her; Count her towers; Consider her ramparts; Go through her palaces, That you may tell it to the next generation. For such is God," literally in the text, "For this is God, Our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death." At that point in history, to go to Jerusalem and to see the city of Jerusalem, if you were a faithful Jew at that point in time, Jerusalem was everything and to be everything to you because God is everything, and it's the place where you can meet God.

This is why when Daniel is in captivity in Babylon, remember he prays three times a day when prayer is forbidden by the Persian king, as an old man he prays and he's cast into the lions' den. Remember what it says? He prayed three times a day toward Jerusalem. Why toward Jerusalem? Because that's the place where God's glory dwells, and so that's what makes Jerusalem the envy of the whole earth. I mean, as he said in verse 2, "Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth." Jerusalem is the most beautiful place in the world at that point in history. Not because of the architecture, not even because of the topography but because of the manifest presence of the living God.

Jerusalem, the supreme importance of the city of God is that's where God dwells. It is the center of Yahweh's activity. Jerusalem. He sends forth his power and his glory, look at chapter 50, look at Psalm 50:1, "The Mighty One, God, the LORD, has spoken, And summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of

beauty, God has shone forth." You see, out of Zion God shines forth. He sends forth his glory, his power through Zion to the world.

Now if you understand that like Nehemiah did and you get the report, now think about it in context, you get the report that his brothers tell him, that the wall is broken down, the gates are burned with fire, the people are in great distress and reproach, and that is heartbreaking. The place that is supposed to manifest the glory of God, that is supposed to delight the whole world, that's supposed to make the nations envious and to want to flow to Jerusalem, to want to know the living God, Jerusalem is a dilapidated object of scorn and ridicule, and a man who loves God, Nehemiah, he is heartbroken when he hears that. And think about it in context, like I said, he doesn't know the end of the book of Nehemiah. He's about to live it. I mean, if you were Nehemiah and I don't know what year he was born, maybe he was born around 475 BC, maybe he's about 30 now, we don't know for sure. Say he's about 30 years old, he's got a great job, he's the cupbearer to the king. He knows that 13 years before, 458, that's like something for us 2008, he knows something that happened in 2008 and God did a mighty work and God turned the heart of the king that he now works for, Artaxerxes, God turned the heart of the king to allow Ezra to go back to Jerusalem with a great number of Levites and priests and an incredible amount of gold and silver given by the king to go back and restore Jerusalem, to take the law of God back to the people of God. It was a revival, in a sense, of the people, the Lord awakening their hearts. It was a sovereign move of God to move the heart of this godless king to do his will. It was like he witnessed, in a sense, what he might have thought at the time was a spiritual awakening and revival. Maybe he was, if he's 30 now, he was about 17, 16, something like that when it happened. He wasn't allowed to go, for some reason. He wasn't a Levite. He had to stay but he saw what God did and with such hope and expectancy the Lord is sending forth the support for Zion, for Jerusalem. God's going to restore Jerusalem to its former glory. 13 years later he gets this report and he's not getting internet reports daily, moment by moment like we do. Too often, right? Isn't that true? We know too much about stuff too often. You just don't need an update every time the website wants to give you an update, whatever your news website is. Bing. Not Bing, but you know. You see it on your phone however, so whatever your notification is. You need to turn those things off. We just don't need to be notified. Just check it once a day, you know, maybe twice a day but it's just too much.

But anyway, so Nehemiah didn't know what was going on in Jerusalem and he finally gets a report because his brother had gone, and his brother comes back and gives him that report and his heart is broken. The center of Yahweh's activity is an object of ridicule and scorn. It seems that God has abandoned them, despair sets in, but then he calls out to God.

Now so that's the supreme importance of the city of God. Now that's then. Now. The city of God today, the fulfillment of Jerusalem is the church ultimately. I'm not saying that there's not a place for Israel, I believe there actually is a place in God's plan for Israel and even physical Jerusalem. I think it's still in the plan of God but I don't think it's the main point at all. I think it's a secondary point. The main point of Jerusalem and the temple was always the people of God, that God was going to send his Son to purchase for himself

from every tribe and tongue and kindred, the church. And I'll just call your attention to a couple of passages.

Turn with me to Hebrews 12:18. Now Paul is writing to Jews who would really understand what Jerusalem was all about, what the city of God was all about. They would understand the urgent importance of Jerusalem all throughout Old Testament history. But look what the author of Hebrews, did I say the Apostle Paul? Freudian slip. I don't believe Paul wrote this but some of you do. I did but it doesn't really matter. God wrote it through someone. My personal opinion is Barnabas who's associated with Paul therefore he had a lot of Paul's theology. Anyway, sorry about that.

Hebrews 12:18. He's writing to Jews and he's telling them who they are now. These are Jews who've become believers in Jesus. He's writing and exhorting them to stay faithful to Christ, not to turn back to their Jewish faith, Jewish unbelief, but to their true realized Jewish faith which is now the Christian faith because Christ has come. The Jewish Messiah has come. He says, verse 18, Hebrews 12, "For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire," this is talking about Mount Sinai for a moment, "and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind," you have not come to that mountain, "and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them." This is in Exodus. You didn't come to that.

Skip on down to verse 22, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God." You now by believing in Jesus, you have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God. Look at the next words, "the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels," look at the next phrase, "to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven." You now have come to be a part of the true heavenly Jerusalem, the archetype, the type of Jerusalem, the city has now met its heavenly fulfillment in the same way that the earthly temple was a type of the temple in heaven, and that Jesus then is the temple and that we are the temple.

Jerusalem was a type of the church. This is seen even as well also in Revelation 21:1. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband." The holy city, the new Jerusalem is the bride and the bride is the church.

So then for us to rebuild Jerusalem and to seek the welfare of Jerusalem is to seek the welfare of the bride, to seek the welfare of the church because the church is the place where God meets the world. As a Spirit-filled believer, you have become a meeting place for lost people to meet the true and living God, and through the gospel proclaimed by a believer, that's how they come to know the reality of salvation. So this means the supreme importance of Jerusalem, the fact that Jerusalem is to be the beauty of all the earth, that God thinks Jerusalem is the most beautiful place on the earth in the old covenant means, what? It means that the church is the most beautiful place in the world. It means the church is the center of the activity of Yahweh today. God is at work in his

church. He's at work governing all things providentially, yes; reigning and ruling over all things, yes, but he is supremely at work, the focus and locus of his activity is the church of Jesus Christ.

And so this means it's the most important thing that we can be about is building and seeking the welfare of the true Jerusalem, the church. So keep calm and carry on means be about building the church. You can do that no matter what they do, no matter how things change. They did it under Persian hegemony. They did it then when the Persians were replaced by the Greeks. Political upheaval happened and the Greeks take over through Alexander the Great. Didn't change the message and the purpose and the calling of the people of God. Keep gathering for worship. Keep looking to the word. Keep the walls. Keep the separation from the surrounding nations. Don't be like them. Don't be conformed to the world. Be transformed.

So that's the first point, the supreme importance of the city of God. The second point is the sad state of the city of God. The sad state of the city of God. Back to Nehemiah chapters 1 and 2. It's interesting how the Lord even unpacks this for us. You have three reports about the state of Jerusalem in the passage. This is the kind of thing that you have to watch as you're reading the Bible. Look, the Lord lets you hear about the report and it's actually in quotation marks in verse 3, "They said to me, 'The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.'" Nehemiah stops in telling us the story and he lets us hear his brother and his friends tell him exactly what they told him.

And then you have the same thing repeated now, that, in a sense, was a report from Jerusalem that we get to hear. Then you have Nehemiah make an appeal for Jerusalem and we hear his voice tell us again how bad things are in Jerusalem in chapter 2, verse 3, after he lets himself be sad in the king's presence intentionally, praying about this opportunity to appeal for Jerusalem, the king asks him, "Why is your face sad," verse 2, "and though you are not sick? Nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid." Nehemiah was risking his life, to be sad in the king's presence was a death sentence if the king chose to put you to death. "I said to the king," here you have quotation marks again, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

Then you have a third report again quoted after Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem and he inspects the walls, chapter 2, verses 11 to 16. Then you have not just the report from Jerusalem that Nehemiah received, not just the appeal for Jerusalem that Nehemiah gave to Artaxerxes, you have now Nehemiah's assessment in Jerusalem. In chapter 2, verse 17, after he's inspected the walls he says to the officials, verse 16 tells us the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials. He says to them in verse 17, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach."

So you hear desolate, desolate, reproach, reproach, walls broken down, gates burned with fire, walls broken down, gates burned with fire over and over and over because he wants us to feel what he felt. The Spirit of God wants us to be broken-hearted over the state of Jerusalem because of the supreme importance of the city of God. The walls are broken down. The gates are burned with fire. Enemies come at will disrupting the worship of God, humiliating the people of God, scorning the people of God. Twice you heard the word reproach. I'm reading that out of the New American Standard. Other translations speak of disgrace, to suffer derision, shame, great distress and trouble, it means evil, there is evil that's happening in Jerusalem. Harm, the word evil means harm, the opposite of good, what God would want. The opposite is happening and the people of God and the city lies desolate, literally lies in ruins, is dried up like a desert. It's like you go out into a place where there is no life. He said and there's no life, no water, no vegetation, that's Jerusalem. That's the city of God. That's the place that matters most in the world. That's the place that's supposed to be the most beautiful place in the world. That's the sad state of affairs.

That's then. What's the sad state of affairs now? How does that apply to us? We're not talking about physical buildings, we're talking about a spiritual building. We're talking about a spiritual temple and a spiritual city. Are the walls broken down? Are the gates burned with fire in God's church today? Is there great trouble and distress? Evil in the camp? Have we become an object of scorn and ridicule, legitimate scorn and ridicule? I mean, it doesn't mean, you could be ridiculed and scorned as Jesus was. He was reviled and he was unworthy of any revilement. He was perfect in every way. But the people of God can be legitimately ridiculed and scorned and is that the case today? To the degree that we are like the world and that the world is coming into the church, then we become an object of derision and scorn.

Think about this in a number of ways. I mean, you think about it in terms of your own personal life and your own personal really your heart. You and I, is the world pressing into our heart or are we growing in purity of heart, or are we being conformed to the world in our hearts? Is our thinking becoming more worldly? Are our affections, are the things that we value and treasure becoming more and more like the world? Do we love what they love or do we love what God loves? Do we hate what the world hates or do we hate what God hates? Purity of heart, purity of life, is our life characterized by the world? Do people look at us, do they see any difference or do they see what looks like as they observe our character, as they observe our actions, as they listen to our words, as they hear our tone of voice, as they see the way we treat other people, do they see worldly people doing worldly things? Are the gates burned with fire and the walls broken-down so that, you know, a city without walls is impossible to defend. The enemy comes at will and does what it wants to. Proverbs talks about a city without walls is like a man who has no self-control. Any temptation overruns him. This is what this is describing. Are we growing in holiness and in self-control or are we becoming like the world?

And not just purity or holiness of heart, holiness of action and life, but holiness of relationships. What do our relationships look like in here, in Jerusalem, in the church, among us? What are our relationships like? Are they like the world? What are our

marriages like? Are they looking more like Jesus and the church, or are they looking more and more like the hopeless and ungodly?

Parents, what is your treatment of your children and your shepherding of your children, your discipline of your children? Are you looking more like the world or are you looking more like your God? Children, are you looking more like the world? Are you becoming disobedient to parents just like the ungodly? You may name the name of Christ, do you look like Jesus? Or are you becoming more like the world in despising your elders?

So worldliness coming into the church is what this is telling us we must fight, we must resist actively. We must build the walls of Jerusalem which is pursuing purity, it's pursuing holiness. God calls us to be holy as he is holy, to be separate. That's a key theme in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. If you are catching up with us, I encourage you to read from Ezra 1 up to Nehemiah 4 and, Lord willing, we're going to start Nehemiah 5 next week, and as you read it, what you'll see is one of the key themes is separation from the nations around them. And the reason they had to be separate, the reason they couldn't intermarry at that point again in redemptive history, it wasn't about racial issues, it wasn't about the Jewish race being pure, it was about spiritual issues because God always allowed proselytes to come. It wasn't about a pure blood, it was about a pure spirit because at every chapter of Scripture, I mean every chapter of history of the Bible, you see proselytes coming in, the Egyptians coming out with the Israelites, many of them coming along with the Israelites out of Egypt because they wanted to follow Yahweh. Or look at Rahab, the harlot, saved out of Jericho by God's grace, her following Jesus and marrying and having a son named Boaz who the Lord used to rescue a Moabitess Ruth out of her ungodly history and to become, both those ladies, in the line of Christ. So God is a God who's not a respecter of persons. He invites all people to come but once you come, he says, "If you come, you must trust Me in a real and living way, enter into a covenant relationship with Me, and by My power and My grace, only by My power and My grace, be holy for I am holy."

So we must pursue that kind of purity and this is what we're called to do. So as we look at our lives, as we look at our hearts, as we look at our actions, we look at our relationships, are we being overrun by the enemies that surround us? It's such a, I've really thought a lot about this and I think the last year has been such an interesting and challenging year, and we know that it's almost become, you know, just you have to say that all the time. 2020, you know what a year or whatever, but thinking about it a little differently, spiritually, and the pressures of the world being applied to the church, one of the ways I think that we see that worldliness coming in and the gates being knocked down and burned with fire and the walls being torn down, the church becoming like the world, is in the way we relate to one another because of the immense pressure of the world, and let me just share with you a couple of ways I think this happens.

Let's talk about, I'm going to get to some things that you may start to be a little unsettled by and I urge you to keep listening. Don't do like the world because what the world does now is as soon as somebody says a buzzword, they shut you down. If I say some buzzwords because I'm in the body of Christ, or you say some buzzwords to me in the

body of Christ, we cannot shut one another down over something that's silly and superficial. We must love one another. If you belong to Jesus, you have no other choice but to love your brothers and sisters.

Now what's happening in the body of Christ? To mask or not to mask, that is the question. Some people because the world says and the world speaks on both sides, I'm not trying to decide this issue. We're not going to decide this issue today. Just Ty's gotten some information. No, I'm just telling you to think about this biblically. Some people in the world say that if you're compassionate and you're loving and kind, surely you would wear a mask. I had someone tell me recently, "Jesus would have worn a mask." And the assumption is, the prideful assumption is it's not just on this side, I'm going to come out on the other side in a moment, the prideful assumption is, "I'm compassionate and you are not." And you see that creates division. You're judging your brother. You're not talking to your brother.

Now let's flip it around. You think that mask wearing is not good. You question the science. You think that you see the media seems to be sort of hammering that in a way that makes you skeptical. You think about the fact, and this is an interesting thing, somebody I read recently, what's the impact of not seeing the human smile on the souls of people? What's the impact of that? What does it do to not see the human countenance fully? I heard Dennis Prager talking about this on a video the other day. He was talking about Muslim countries and how the veil that Muslim women wear separates people. You don't see the person the same way. And he was making the observation that he's been to 130 different countries, Dennis Prager, Prager U, got a lot of great videos to, I think, help you think about these things, not that they're always right about everything but they certainly think in some ways. He's a Jewish guy. He thinks in some very sound ways logically. But he said, "I've been to 130 countries and the thing that I love most about America that stands out above every country and there's no country that's greater in this way, there are some that are approximately close but many far behind it, is the way American strangers will talk to American strangers, that you get strangers in an elevator, they'll talk to one another. People waiting in line will talk to one another." But he said, "I was recently at a place where people were standing and, of course, they're standing apart, and they're standing with their masks on and nobody was talking to anybody else."

Now listen, I'm not trying to solve, I'm not saying that no mask. You hear what I'm saying? I'm saying that a person who says they shouldn't wear a mask may have some good reasons, godly reasons that they've made that decision. Now listen, what do you do with that? Talk to one another. Love one another and say, "Listen, hey, I see that you feel this way, obviously it's important to you, is it because, what reason is it that you're doing this or you're not doing this?" And freely speak. If you believe that the science is settled and it's so clear and that the compassionate thing is, well, share that but be humble and willing to listen.

And you know, a lot of times and, listen, let me just tell you, when you have these conversations, a lot of times it's going to make initially things more messy, and so you don't judge that. It doesn't matter if you, you do what God tells you to do and let him

worry about the results. A lot of times you have to make a bigger mess before you actually clean things up. Isn't that true in life? If you really want to clean it up, you're going to have to make a mess to get really cleaned up. Well, sometimes we're going to have conversations and things are going to be unsettling and difficult and you may, you know, just shut them out and you may have to come back and say, "Please forgive me." But do you know what's going to happen more often than we would imagine is you're going to have a disagreement that may not get resolved that first time, it may not get resolved the second time, you may have to agree to disagree because some of these things, you know, the Bible does not talk about mask wearing. There's not a verse in there.

So we're applying principles of Scripture and we're trying to apply wisdom to our lives and we have imperfect information, but what's going to happen is you have those conversations and you're determined to love your brother or your sister, and you hear them out and you hear their heart, and you see that they really passionately have these other perspectives, you're going to even if you think they're still wrong, you're going to know they're not what the world is telling you about people who disagree with you. The world is telling you that, like say, the person who doesn't want to wear a mask is thinking maybe the world's side on that side, though it's a smaller number of people maybe. I don't know for sure if it is or not, but it seems in the media anyway it's less represented. They're over here thinking you're just scared, you're just controlled by fear. They could be thinking that. I'm not saying that at all, I'm saying that's the kind of thing, though, that people say in the world. Well, when you talk and you share with one another and you hear their hearts, you're going to say, "This is my sister in Christ who I don't yet agree with on this but I hear where they're coming from. I didn't think about that. They really sincerely believe this is the right thing to do. They have these reasons that they've come to that point." And it helps you be more sensitive and do you know what it does also? It helps you be a whole lot better when you talk to an unbeliever about these issues. It's like we practice in here and it'll be a lot better out there.

This is true politically. I think we need to have a lot more uncomfortable conversations. I think we need to start talking about these issues that the world is being divided over and that people are in their own little bunkers, in their own little citadels have determined and thought through and come to conclusions and there they are in their walled city over here separated from other Christians in their walled city over here, and the problem is there's only one set of walls in the city of God and it goes outside of all of us. We don't make walls within to separate each other. And so if you have done that, you must tear down that wall. By the grace of God and the blood of Jesus Christ he has demolished the partitions that separate us.

So we must love each other enough to pursue unity in the midst of a world that has gone crazy. I mean, because everybody's getting more entrenched, they're listening in their own echo chambers, they're becoming more convinced of their own positions, and they're harboring thoughts of other people that are not true. Even in worldly people, I mean, seriously, because the grace of God is so great and every human being is in the image of God, it's amazing how when you really even talk to an unbeliever, many times you might

think they're going to be a certain way and you find out, and haven't you had conversations and you're like, that guy looked like he was going to be mean, or that woman looked like she had a sour look on her face, but you said something, you had a conversation and there was real connection and kindness. The image of God.

But you and I in this house among the people of God, there is no excuse for division and we need to call one another out on it. You need to call me out on it and I want to call you out on it when I see it. It's too important to Jesus. The thing that was beating on his heart and as he sat before the cross and thinking about the agony of the cross that would be so, just the thinking of that that weighed upon him his whole life, that he would be experiencing the wrath of God, being made to be the bearer of sin so that 2 Corinthians 5 says he became sin, the bearing of sin was so profound that the Apostle Paul says it's almost like that. And you think about the holy one of Israel experiencing that, the agony of that, and the separation from the Father, in some sense, not metaphysically, God can't be divided, I know this is a mystery, but in some sense the favor of God being withdrawn from the man Christ Jesus on the cross and the agony of that led him to sweat drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane. That's coming. How could you think of anything else? Look at Christ. Before the cross, that night, how much time he spends praying for you and me, even praying for Peter, "I pray that you won't be overcome. Satan wants to sift you like wheat. I've prayed for you." What was he praying for? He was praying that we might be one even as the Father and Son are one, "That they may be one. I in you, they in Me, that they might be one." Supernatural oneness, and do you know how that comes? It doesn't come easy. That comes by learning to love one another warts and all, and helping one another to become more and more holy in the process.

So God is calling us to rebuild the walls outside which means being different than the world. We have to pursue one another inside. And like I said, there's going to be hard conversations, we're going to stumble, we're going to fall, we're going to have to... Listen, it's amazing. I get amazed at how stupid I can be still. I've been a believer, been a pastor for 27 years and yet I can be appalled at just the sinful way I can respond in a situation that, "What is wrong with me?" There's a sense in which that's going to be a challenge all the way until I die. So that's going to be a challenge in our relationships. We're going to offend one another. We're going to hurt one another but we have to be willing to humble ourselves and go and confess our sins to one another, and restore fellowship with one another, pray for one another, and love one another. And when you do that, when you are pursuing another brother or sister in love with patience, sometimes you can't just keep talking about it, you've got to say, "Okay, let's stop now. I know this isn't a good time to continue but I'm going to call you next week because I love you, and we're going to get together again when you're ready and we're going to talk."

You do that, you are building the wall of Jerusalem and what you are doing is you're making Jerusalem, the true spiritual Jerusalem the most beautiful place on earth. You are making it so that God shines forth from Jerusalem, his glory. People who don't know how to love one another, can't love one another, they're lost in their sin, they're turned in upon themselves completely and they see us, and Jesus when he said in John 13, the same night as he prayed for the oneness in John 17, he said, "A new command I give to you that you

love one another as I also have loved you, that you love one another, and by this all men will know that you are My disciples, by your love one for another." Supernatural love flowing in the people of God is the beauty of Zion, the glory of God being made manifest because God is love. He's true love. He's not the syrupy kind of sentimental stuff the world thinks. He is true love which is the essence of sacrifice for the true good and best of another, and you and I can manifest that to each other because Christ is in us and greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. And the Lord help us to beautify Jerusalem, and you see, if we do this, no matter what happens out there, if we're doing this, God's kingdom is advancing mightily. Mightily. Nothing more significant you can be involved in than that. Everything else that we do is to make us able to do that and if we do that, when we get home he's going to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Oh, to hear those words.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your amazing grace, the beauty of Your salvation that You've made known through Jesus Christ, to take wicked sinners who are all about themselves, who really in our heart of hearts hated You and were all about only self to such a degree that we really could not even love others, and You by giving Your Son at Calvary, paying for our sins through His blood, giving us new hearts by Your Spirit, You restore us to fellowship with You, we become Your dear children, You love us with an everlasting love, nothing can change that, and out of the overflow of that love with which You've loved us, we love because You first loved us. Lord, let us abide in Your love and let us extend that love, and let us pursue holiness that is a part of really what loving is. To help one another pursue holiness is the most loving thing that we can do for our brothers and sisters, and having them help us pursue holiness is the most loving thing they can do for us. Help us, O God. Help us beautify the city of God. May it be a place that makes unbelievers envious and wanting to know what is it about you, and how can you be like that, and we can say, "His name is Jesus." We pray in His name. Amen.