

REBUILDING: the Gates in Your Life

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Our theme this month is “rebuilding”—rebuilding our life with God. Rebuilding is not just a one-time goal; it needs to be a recurring occupation, because life-on-earth is continually breaking down and declining.

When maintenance of a church building like ours is deferred, as it has been since we started planning to remodel, the structure and its systems don't just wait for the remodel to begin—they continue to age and breakdown, and the needs for repair and replacement accumulate.

Our lives are similar—if we are not actively rebuilding through spiritual disciplines, we will continue to decline and be distracted by breakdowns.

Rebuilding the Temple in your life—that place for Christ, for the presence of God, for worship and revelation in the power of the Holy Spirit—is what will keep you centered and grounded and bring glory to God.

Rebuilding the walls in your life—those barriers that identify and protect you—includes breaking down the walls that have hindered and imprisoned you from becoming the person God created you to be, building up the walls that define and protect you, and rebuilding the godly walls that have crumbled due to time and aging or the activity of enemies.

However, a wall—even a godly wall—that has no gates or doors, no points of entry or exit, will only serve as a prison to isolate us from opportunities to know and serve the Lord.

So, today, I'm speaking about rebuilding the gates (or doors) in order to restore and introduce wonderful opportunities to glorify Christ in your life.

Once the gates have been rebuilt, the Holy Spirit can guide you to use them as appropriate, for God is able to open doors that no one else can shut and close doors that no one else can open (Revelation 3:7).

Gates and doors provide points of entry from the outside to the inside. Paul noted that *“through [Jesus] we both have access by one Spirit to the Father”* (Ephesians 2:14). Access to God's presence and God's love is a glorious gift of the Father, provided through your faith in Jesus Christ. No matter how long it's been, no matter how far you may have fallen, no matter what you may have done or failed to do—if you sincerely return to Christ—Jesus will always receive you, He will never reject you. Christians

have been given access to the Father. You have the key to the throne room. You have the password that opens the door; that password is “Jesus.”

Gates and doors also provide points of exit from the inside to the outside. Paul explained, *“The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, He will show you a way out so that you can endure”* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

There will be times in your life when you may feel trapped by your circumstances, or imprisoned by your weaknesses. You may find yourself in a shadowed valley of difficulty or confusion. You want nothing more than to get out of there—to reach the sunlight again, to regain an overview of your surroundings, to recover a sense of positive direction for your life.

God assures us that He will always provide and guide you to such a way of escape. It may not be instantaneous, but it is assured, if you follow His lead.

Gates and doors are important to us!

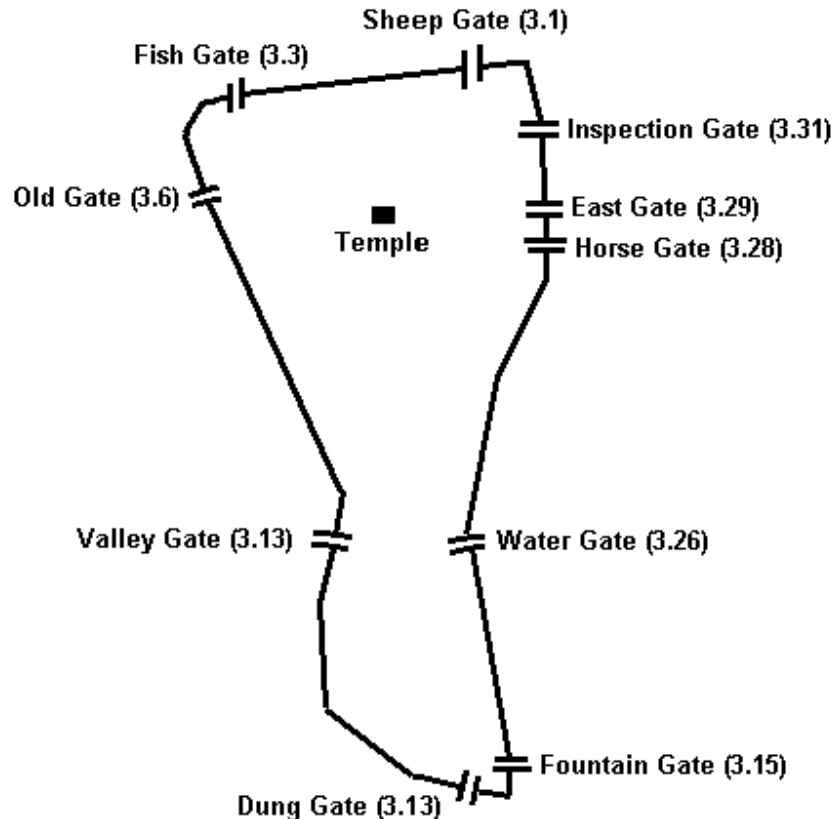
Last Sunday we learned that a man named Nehemiah felt disgraced by the broken down condition of the city of Jerusalem—the place His God (and ours), Jehovah, had honored with His presence and His name. He was so moved that he inspired a popular movement to rebuild the city’s walls, and not only its walls, but also the gates within those walls.

When he returned to the devastated city, one of the first things he did was to take a select group of supporters on a nighttime assessment tour of the city, examining the current sad state of affairs for himself. From the northeast corner of the city they traveled to the west, then southward and east, and finally, north again to their starting point, inspecting the walls and their gates.

Today, we’re going to follow their route to see the gates they examined and learn the meaning of those gates and our need to rebuild (and use) similar gates in our own lives. Are you ready for a good walk?

Here’s the map, as described in Nehemiah 3:

Nehemiah's Jerusalem



Sheep Gate (Nehemiah 3:1,32, 12:39)

Their starting point was the Sheep Gate, to the north of the Temple. This was the gate through which the sheep and lambs to be used for sacrifice were herded to the altar area of the Temple grounds.

This gate was built by the High Priest, Eliashib (whose name means “God restores”). This picture of restoration describes our own initiation into the Christian life—that realization that Jesus, *our* High Priest, is also the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world.

The Sheep Gate reminds us of the sacrifice that Jesus made for our sins on the cross. Just as the Sheep Gate was the starting point of Nehemiah’s tour, the cross of Jesus is the starting point of our personal redemption and restoration. And you will also notice as you read the entire chapter that, when they came full circle on their tour, they arrived again at the Sheep Gate, for everything in the Christian life starts and ends with this amazing act of saving love at the cross.

Fish Gate (Nehemiah 3:3, 12:39)

Next, they arrived at the Fish Gate, so called because the fisherman from the Sea of Galilee would deliver their catch through this gate to be sold in the city's marketplace. The Fish Gate reminds us of our task of fishing "for the souls of men"—evangelism.

It is a natural progression, after trusting the Christ who died for our sins and experiencing the new birth, to tell others about it. The new believer's simple testimony of what Jesus has done in their lives qualifies them to be great "fishers of men."

Surveys have shown that believers who have been saved less than two years are the most effective evangelists in the church, simply because they still have the most unsaved friends. Generally, the longer you follow Christ, the more involved you will become with other believers, and the fewer non-Christian friends you will have, unless you intentionally develop new relationships through work or service.

Old Gate (Nehemiah 3:6, 12:39)

The Old (or, First) Gate was their third stop and represents to us the old ways of truth discovered in the First Covenant (the Old Testament).

You see, a young Christian, having stepped through the Sheep Gate, then the Fish Gate, will soon see the need for the Old Gate—that is, the old ways of God's truth that never change.

Jeremiah 6:16 states *"This is what the Lord says: 'Stop at the crossroads and look around. Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls.'"*

I'm not referring to old ways of "doing church" or old codes of Christian conduct which reflect the times or the local culture. Even our familiar ways of expressing our faith through our style of worship and the songs we sing, and our habits of gathering and the way we conduct our meetings, must one day change and give way to new expressions, lest we become mere relics of the past and cease to communicate the everlasting Good News to the next generation.

Our modes of expression must adjust to meet the needs of our culture and times, or else our faith will not be understood by others. However, God's moral values do not change with seasons and cultures, but are valid and vital in every place and every generation. If the Gospel you believe and practice and preach cannot be understood and received by both young and old, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, in any culture of the world, then it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ; it is some culturally-bound derivative of the Good News, and will soon become an antique.

Valley Gate (Nehemiah 2:13, 3:13)

The walk from the Old Gate to the Valley Gate is lengthy. And there is much to learn from the Word of God during the early phase of Christian growth and discipleship. The revelations can create such wonder and gratitude that it may feel as though God will carry you forever! But sooner or later you will arrive at the Valley Gate.

This gate led to the path down into the Valley of Hinnom (referred to by Jesus as *Gehenna*, a picture of perpetual burning), and reminds us of the humbling experience that trials bring into our lives—what we call “valley” experiences—that the Lord uses to mature our faith and understanding.

Trials in a “valley of decision” are never easy, but nothing much grows on the tops of mountains as it does down in the valley below. So also in our spiritual experience: it is the tough times that produce the most fruit, if we keep trusting the Lord.

Dung (Refuse) Gate (Nehemiah 2:14, 3:14, 12:31)

Again, there is a long walk to the next gate, suggesting that valley experiences may last for awhile. But the result of those introspective periods is clearly seen when we arrive at the Dung Gate.

All the refuse and rubbish of Jerusalem was carried out through this gate and thrown down into the bottom of the Valley of Hinnom to be burned. So it is in our own lives. Valley experiences reveal the rubbish that has accumulated in our minds and hearts that needs to be put off and burned, so that true faith, refined by fire, can grow and produce fruit.

This gate was also known as the Pottery Gate, for the potters’ broken clay pieces also were tossed out there. This causes me to think of the spiritual pressure that is required to mold and shape our lives to be like Jesus. Clearing the clutter and garbage from our lives as the Lord shapes us is not easy and seldom fun, but the benefits are significant, as will be shown in a moment.

Notice that at this point one’s Christian life takes a dramatic “turning of the corner.” Our journey, to this point, has taken us downhill and the corresponding experiences have been increasingly difficult, but now there is a sharp turn in the road and we begin to move upward again.

Fountain Gate (Nehemiah 2:14, 3:15, 12:37)

This gate was next to the Pool of Siloam, where a blind man washed mud from his eyes and received his sight (John 9:6-7). You will notice from the map that the Fountain Gate is quite near to the Dung Gate. This suggests that after a deep valley experi-

ence, when rubbish has been removed from our lives and true faith begins to mature, then the fountains quickly begin to flow again!

The Fountain Gate illustrates the living waters of the Holy Spirit that renew and empower us for Christian life and service.

John 7:37-39

³⁷ *Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, "Anyone who is thirsty may come to me!*

³⁸ *Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'* ³⁹ *(When he said "living water," he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him.*

Water Gate (Nehemiah 3:25-26)

Next, we must come to the Water Gate. The Gibeonites, bearers of water, carried water through this gate. The Water Gate depicts the Word of God and its effect in our lives. Paul wrote that we are "...washed by the cleansing of God's word" (Ephesians 5:26).

It is no coincidence that this gate was located near to the Fountain Gate, for the two experiences of the Christian life often are linked. The Holy Spirit makes the Word of God alive within us and uses the Scriptures to bring cleansing, encouragement, gifts, and direction to our lives.

Horse Gate (Nehemiah 3:28)

The Horse Gate, close to King David's palace, was the entry and exit for the king's soldiers. It speaks to me of spiritual warfare, as horses were the "tanks" in ancient battles and a ubiquitous symbol of war. Spiritual warfare is required of every Christian, because we live in a fallen and corrupted world; as a result, we are all in a battle every day, whether we recognize it or not.

Ephesians 6:12

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

Prophetically, the Horse Gate speaks of the Day of the Lord and its judgments, as recorded in Revelation 6-19. John wrote, "*Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. Its rider was named Faithful and True, for he judges fairly and wages a righteous war*" (Revelation 19:11).

The last three gates of Nehemiah's tour depict those end times and the return of Jesus Christ. You may see that these three gates are very close together, as are the events they symbolize.

East Gate (Nehemiah 3:29)

The East Gate, also known as the Golden Gate, faced the east and the rising sun. Its renown among Jews was because of its location (the only gate opening directly onto the Temple grounds) and for one particular future event—the coming of Messiah!

Ezekiel 44:1-3 says, *“the east gateway in the outer wall of the Temple area... was closed. ² And the Lord said to me, “This gate must remain closed; it will never again be opened. No one will ever open it and pass through, for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered here. Therefore, it must always remain shut.”* Indeed, it was walled shut by the Arabs in 810 AD, and has never been reopened. The East Gate looks toward the Mount of Olives, to which the Lord Jesus will return.

Zechariah 14:4

On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem. And the Mount of Olives will split apart, making a wide valley running from east to west. Half the mountain will move toward the north and half toward the south.

He will then enter Jerusalem by the East Gate, as He did astride a donkey on the first Palm Sunday. This gate points to the return of King Jesus. It reminds us to live with this continual hope and to long for His return (according to 2 Timothy 4:8, a special crown will be given to those who do this). This gate is very near to the Horse Gate because the day of God's wrath quickly concludes with the return of the Lord Jesus (Revelation 19).

Inspection Gate (Nehemiah 3:31)

The last gate that Nehemiah examined was the Inspection Gate or Miphkad Gate, the place of gathering for registration (*miphkad* means numbering). This gate symbolizes the judgment seat of Christ, where our lives will be inspected and rewarded appropriately by our Lord.

Christians should always live with this in mind. We are to live our lives with eternity in view, caring more for the things that last forever than for the temporal things around us that we can see and feel and touch.

Prophetically this gate also speaks of the judgment of the nations that takes place when Jesus returns, as recorded in Matthew 25:31-46.

Elsewhere, Nehemiah recorded two other gates, which have not been rebuilt and are not shown on our map:

Ephraim (North) Gate (Nehemiah 8:16, 12:39)

The North Gate looked toward the fruitful land of Ephraim, whose name means “doubly fruitful,” and suggests the fruitful unity of all believers (Jew and Gentile, earthly and heavenly) in the one Church of Jesus Christ—the One who broke down the dividing wall that once stood between us. It answers to Jesus’ prayer, *“I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you”* (John 17:21).

Prison (Guard) Gate (Nehemiah 12:39)

This gate led to the area where prisoners were guarded, and was probably the gate through which an angel escorted Peter to freedom.

It represents the gate of ultimate release by the power of God from the things that imprison and bind us. Finally, we shall be released from the power *and* presence of sin to rule and reign forever with King Jesus.

We might think of these ancient gates in contemporary spiritual terms, as doors of our own hearts.

Revelation 3:20-22

²⁰ *“Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends. ²¹ Those who are victorious will sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my Father on his throne.*

²² *“Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.”*

These doors must be opened from the inside, inviting Christ in.

They may also represent the doors and gates through which we enter the City of God—through which we participate with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in God’s grand enterprise.

We have been given the keys of the Kingdom (Matthew 16:19). We have been given the Spirit of God. We have access!

In closing, I think of the story of four lepers, who sat outside the gates of Samaria, when the city was under siege by the Syrian king of Aram-Damascus. They asked one another, *“Why should we sit here waiting to die?”*

Perhaps they lived there in isolation from the city's population because of their disease, or perhaps they were caught outside when the gates were closed for protection. Either way, they faced starvation if they remained there, or if they returned to the besieged city.

Too many of us are paralyzed by what we imagine may happen if we move through the gate, so we just sit, immobile (as if occupying a church pew was the primary task of a Christian) and unfruitful.

We have the key (Jesus)! We need to use to open the gate and walk through it. God has provided the gates at just the right times in our lives to accomplish His will, but we must choose to use them.

Don't sit idle any longer! Arise! Answer the call of God. Rebuild the walls. Rebuild the gates. Nurture your faith and love, and act courageously for the glory of God.