

West Side Fellowship

As a pastor, my goal for the church has always been that our individual relationships with the Lord would be strong enough to withstand any trial. The idea of being in prison in solitary confinement without a Bible, the church or the pastor; yet still able to seek and hear from the Lord as to the direction we as individuals should go in has been an important target to aim at. It's been a statement that at times can be looked at as being a bit extreme, after all we live in the United Kingdom, yet here we are... under house arrest conditions!

Our last Sunday service was a blessed time, even if it seemed a bit weird with everyone so far apart. For me it was an end to a series of teaching that the Lord has led us through as we have followed the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. We have seen the Lord's ability to provide food and water, his ability to protect us in battle and in our last service, our response as servants of God. The Lord has not sent us into this situation unprepared, rather, He has been preparing us even if we hadn't realised it at the time. I thank God that our last act together was to be able to take communion and to once again remember the Servant King who died on the cross for our salvation.

Despite the trend towards compulsory closures of churches being inevitable, it was not until the Prime Minister gave his address that for me, a sudden reality came about. I'm now a pastor that cannot minister, a teacher that cannot teach, it wasn't so much a loss of faith, but a loss of ability as to how to share the gospel message when confined to home.

However, the Lord is good and as I escaped for my hours exercise, He was there to comfort and to guide, not only on what to do, but how to do it. For although there are all sorts of technologies out there, we need to meet the need of our own congregation and so, for the time being, I will be writing a short letter each week to give us all a challenge from which to seek the Lord. Why write? Well as the Lord explained, it's a technology that He has used from early times as we see in Exodus **17v14** & Exodus **34v27**, but it was also the method of communication of the New Testament as we realise that the New Testament was created as a series of letters. Even the gospel of Luke starts off with the statement from Luke that he was writing an orderly account, **Luke 1v3**. So the series will be called:

Letters from Prison.

I apologise in advance for my poor grammar and spelling, but unlike the leaflets, I cannot pass the message around to a number of people for checking and unlike the Apostle Paul, I don't have a Luke to take a dictation. I have deliberately not included the verses as each one of us needs to keep in practice, looking up scriptures for ourselves, to ensure they are being used in context, but also it will save Nigel calling me up to tell me how many words and commas I have missed.

Letter 1: What am I doing in prison?

The simple answer is "Boris told me I can't go out!" The medical answer is "I'm self isolating to slow down the spread of the virus." However, those answers only give the reason for your confinement; the question is "What are you **doing** in prison?"

Again we can state the obvious, cooking, cleaning, catching up on all the odd jobs that have been overlooked due to lack of time or just trying to maintain family life. All good things in themselves, but what are we **doing for the Lord** in prison?

It is easy to say: "Nothing, I can't do anything because of the restrictions", I must confess this was one of my first reactions, it was then the Lord reminded me that a lot of Paul's letters are letters from prison, **Colossians 4v18 & Philemon 1v1**. The book of Revelation is a letter from John while restricted to Patmos for preaching the gospel (**Revelation 1v9**).

We often think of the early apostles as a group of men dedicated to the Lord who travelled far and wide to preach the gospel message, when in fact they travelled far and wide preaching the gospel until they got arrested and sent to prison! Sometimes for short periods, but at other times they got arrested and stayed arrested until the end of their lives. They did not see it as an end to their ministry; rather they saw it as part of their ministry journey as Paul explained to the church at Caesarea (**Acts 21v10-14**). This was a direction that the Lord was leading him in and rather than restricting his ministry as it would seem from the outside, Paul's ministry was enhanced from prison.

We know that Paul preached many times to many people, yet what do we know of those messages? We know that Paul could talk a congregation to sleep, and even to death (**Acts 20v7-12**), but we have very little record as to what was said. However, the letters that Paul wrote from prison not only spoke to the believers of the day, but are still speaking over 2000 years later. So we have to realise that just because we are restricted in movement doesn't give us an excuse to stop being servants of the Lord. Our location and

circumstances may have changed, but the Lord has not put us into retirement yet no matter what our age (**Philemon 1v9**).

So the question we have to ask ourselves again is the same. What am I doing in prison? What am I doing for the Lord in prison?

In the book of Philemon we see that Paul ministered to those stuck in prison with him (**Philemon 1v13**), not just with words but with actions. In **Acts 16v16-34** Paul and Silas are unfairly beaten, humiliated and flogged (**Acts 16v22-23**) they got put in a cell without a window and fastened in stocks (**Acts 16v24**). Did they complain about their poor treatment, the lack of fresh bread, toilet roll and hand sanitizer? No they praised the Lord (**Acts 16v25**)! They continued to minister in prison in the same way they had ministered outside prison and that ministry spoke not only to those who shared cells around them, but led to the salvation of the jailer himself. So how we live within confinement still speaks.

Paul's ministry in confinement finished up allowing him to minister right in Caesar's household (**Philippians 4v22**), it allowed him to minister to visitors (**Acts 28v17-24**) as he was moved from place to place, and through his letters he has ministered around the whole world for 2000 years, despite being stuck in prison.

We are fortunate that even on our hours exercise we can still minister at a 2 metre distance, a greeting, asking how people are doing, do they need any help? Let us remember they are in the same prison as us, but they are alone and without hope. Let us be the ones who are there to build up and show the joy of the Lord even in the most difficult of times? Our ministry in prison may turn out to be the most important ministry we have ever been involved in.

So once again the question is asked; what are we doing in prison?

Letter 2: What is God doing in prison?

Last week we looked at the question of what we are doing in prison. This week we will look a similar question. What is God doing in prison? Not the thought of God being locked up or restricted by the situation, but what is the Lord doing in our lives while we are in prison.

Genesis 37v1-11 introduces us to the character of Joseph, who even at a young age was hearing from the Lord in dreams (**37v5**). It's a great thing to hear from the Lord, but hearing from God is only the start of the journey. The problem for us is so often we think because we have heard we are far further along the path than we really are. As James says in **James 1v22** "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

The problem with Joseph is that he had been favoured and spoilt by his father (**Genesis 37v3-4**) and that spoiling ruined his character. He had developed a superiority complex and viewed himself as someone special, this meant that when he shared the things the Lord was showing him, rather than it being a blessing to his family, it was just seen as part of his superiority complex and certainly for his brothers meant that the word was rejected.

The other issue for Joseph was that, like so many of us, when he received the word of instruction he assumed that he was now ready to be used by the Lord. What the Lord was showing him would not come to pass for many years and before Joseph could be used, he would have to learn the attitude of Christ that we see in **Philippians 2v5-11**; for to be lifted up by the Lord requires us first to be lowered to the level of obedient servant, something that Joseph would never learn as the favoured son; so as a loving Father, God starts to discipline Joseph.

Discipline always tends to make us think of punishment, probably because when we have wanted people punished, it's been out of anger and them getting what they deserved. Thankfully God doesn't share the same thought process, as if we got what we deserved, "the wages of sin is death" (**Rom 6v23**). God, when He disciplines, He disciplines us for our benefit by disciplining us with the aim of transforming our character for our own good (**Hebrews 12v7-11**). His discipline has the goal of bringing about holiness, righteousness and peace so His discipline brings about blessing in our life. It brings about Christ likeness in us. So often we talk about wanting to follow in the footsteps of Christ, sadly what we usually mean is that we want to continue to live our own way while just adding in what we see as the spiritual blessings.

The problem with our Heavenly Father's discipline is that it needs to be endured (**Hebrews 12v7**) and submitted to (**Hebrews 12v9**), two things that our spoilt flesh rebels against. After all, our flesh follows after the ways of this world, the ways of Satan. His rebellion against submission was the cause of his fall as he started to view himself as an equal if not superior to God. We in the same way tend to rebel against

any kind of discipline with the attitude that God should spoil us and remove this kind of thing from us so that in our eyes we will be blessed. As such the Lords progress in our lives is often painfully slow. Thankfully we have a patient God who endures with us, not wanting anyone to perish, but all of us to come to repentance (**2 Peter 3v9**). Not a saying sorry, but a living of our life in the attitude of Christ. Let us always remember repentance is not something you say, but something you do. If we look through the Bible, Old and New Testaments, when God asks His people to repent it is not a case of saying sorry, but a turning around of lives and attitudes to follow in the ways of God.

Due to our "flesh" problems, the Lord's discipline is not often even seen for what it is. I wonder how often we have finished up in an uncomfortable situation and instead of seeking the Father and asking what is going on, what is he trying to teach us, we have rebelled and called the church to pray that the situation would be taken from us. One of the great things about prison is that there is nowhere to escape. In my early days of missions serving on the mission ship Doulos, I found myself in some very difficult conditions, everything within me wanted to get away. Thankfully a great man of God explained to me that before the ship, when the Lord had wanted to do a work on me, He had used the smallest of hammers to chip away at the issues that needed to be dealt with. However, those blows were not met with thankfulness, instead I moved to a more comfortable place. Now, stuck on the ship, there was nowhere to run to. So as a loving Father He had put away the small hammer and got out a big one and was bashing away. It was painful, but it very rapidly brought about many of the changes in attitude and life that God had intended. The Lord was blessing me in my captivity, I just needed to see what he was doing and work with Him. I began to see that my issues were not caused by the situation; it was my heart reaction to the situation, my rebellion that was being highlighted so that it could be changed.

As we think back to Joseph, God was trying to do a work in him to prepare his heart attitude for the job he had in store for him. Before he could be lifted up to a very high position, his heart had to be humbled to the lowest of positions. For him to reign from above, he needed to have a servant heart. For without these things his ministry would have never reflected the character of God.

Looking at Josephs life, at first it can read like a list of disasters, yet even in disaster we see the hand of God. His brothers wanted to kill him, yet his life was spared (Genesis 37v19-22), in slavery he finished up in a good position in Potiphar's household (**Genesis 39v2**) and even in prison the Lord granted him favour (Genesis **39v21-23**); yet despite this we see that Joseph was slow to learn.

In his past, his pride had been a big issue that had caused his brothers to hate him. You would think that slavery would humble him, yet even as a slave, as soon as there was a glimpse of success, his pride returned; This time telling Potiphar's wife that he was the greatest in the household making him above her (**Gen 39v9**), forgetting that in Godly marriage the two become one. Once again his pride caused him problems and once again the Lord had to work his hand of discipline and place Joseph in an

even more difficult situation... Prison! Not because he had done anything wrong, but because of the attitude he had behind doing what was right, for it is out of the overflow of the heart that we speak and minister (**Matthew 12v34**). Sadly his heart attitude of pride had not been altered, just temporarily misplaced.

Even in prison, when the Lord is using him to minister to the cupbearer, his thoughts once again turn to freedom, he sees his ministry as a chance to get out; he starts to look on the things that have happened to him as a set of injustices, seeing no fault in himself (**Genesis 40v14-15**). We see at this point that his heart was still fighting against the discipline of God. Instead of going to God, he views the cupbearer as his way of getting freedom from his current situation, using his ministry gifts to try and get a more comfortable place in life. How hard it must have been when once again Joseph was left in captivity with no one coming to his aid (**Genesis 40v23**).

How often in our lives do we see the same problems arise over and over again and fight to be free from the prison we find ourselves in, convinced that freedom is what we need?

Instead we need to understand that when we reject the Lord's discipline, He is loving and patient. He doesn't give up but takes us through the same situation again, just in a different environment. Is it fair? Not by the world's standards, but then the death of Jesus on the cross, the ultimate acts of love and servanthood (**John 15v13**), was not fair by the world's standards. Of course we don't complain about that because it was to our benefit. Our attitudes change very quickly when we see things as being unfair towards us.

Now as we sit in our homes under house arrest conditions, what is the Lord trying to teach us in our lives? Why are we discontent? After all we have food and clothing so we should be content (**1 Timothy 6v8**). Are we looking at ways to escape, planning and scheming our way out, frustrated by the delays? Or are we able to look at our frustrations and issues and see them for the heart attitudes they are? Fruits of the sinful nature (**Galatians 5v19-26**)! Are we able to take this time to examine ourselves and see what our walk with the Lord is truly like (**1 Corinthians 11v28-32**)?

If we will allow Him the time, and accept the Lord's discipline with the grace it has been given, we will leave our prisons with the ability to lead others with a humble heart, just as Christ led us.

Joseph though his pride went from bad to worse, I'm not sure how long it was from him going into slavery to being raised up under Pharaoh, but we know that even after the cupbearer had left prison he spent another two years (**Genesis 41v1**) alone learning humility before God. It was only through an act of God that Joseph was set free. His pride in his ministry and abilities had gone; instead he came before Pharaoh as a humble servant giving glory to God (**Genesis 41v16, Genesis 41v28, Genesis 41v32**). This humbled man was now the perfect person for God to lift up (**Genesis 41v39-40**).

So the question for us this week is what is God doing in prison? What is the Lord trying to show us in our lives? He's got us just where he wants us, so maybe it's time to look at the heart attitude behind our struggles and allow the Lord to humble us and teach us and lead us in the attitude of Christ (**Philippians 2v5-11**).

Letter 3: Stir Crazy

1 Peter 4v1-11

As I was growing up one of my favourite TV series was Porridge with Ronnie Barker set in the fictional Slade prison. Fletcher who was played by Ronnie Barker often used to refer to being in prison as being in "Stir". The word comes from a Romany background (Stardo), that was used when someone was held in one place or imprisoned. For a travelling people such as the Romany's it meant that they could not get on with their life.

The idea of going stir crazy comes from the results of being held in that confinement, not being able to do what we want to do. The frustration of being prevented from doing something or having something due to our confinement. In our current situation, from a worldly point of view we are being confined, restricted, to save lives. However, as Christians, our goal is not the saving of lives, but the saving of souls; the two are not the same and can often be in complete opposition to each other. Jesus died to self, was imprisoned and restricted by the Romans and the nails of the cross, and yet his death on that cross brought us life.

"Stir" shows us what we truly desire, we miss family and friends, we miss going to our favourite places, even our daily routine. We may miss work and even the fellowship of the church, but it does not mean we have to miss God. Maybe it is at this time that the Lord is showing us just how weak our relationship with Him is and how poor our desire is for Him. We can make excuses for ourselves that we cannot get to church, we are lacking in teaching, missing worship and communion. Yet these things are not our relationship with God and should not be the things that our relationship with God is based on. Quite the opposite, our true fellowship is the overflow of our individual relationships with the Father through Christ that mutually encourage each other (Romans 1v11-12).

In John 14v6 Jesus said:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

So often we read this verse and praise God for Jesus, for making a way, yet so often we don't realise that we are not walking the way, the way to the Father. We use the business of life as an excuse; we deceive ourselves, by telling the Lord how busy we are for Him, so busy that we don't have time to come to Him. One thing I have noticed is that our nation has been brought to a standstill by the Coronavirus, but it has not been brought to its knees. I wonder if the same is true of the church, not the Sunday service or the prayer meeting, but the individual believers who make up the body of Christ. Has this virus brought us to a stand still or has it brought us closer to the Lord, spiritually on our knees in submission.

For now the truth is revealed. No longer do we have the excuse of being busy, no longer can we use the fact we go to church as the basis for our spiritual lives. Now it has come down to being locked in a room with the Father. Does this make us happy or sad? When Liz and I first went into missions, someone made fun of me for getting married so young. My reply to him was "We are about to spend two years in a small cabin on a mission ship. I know who I am sharing my cabin with; who are you going to share yours with?"

We now find ourselves locked in our cells, but not in solitary confinement. The Lord is with us. Do we find ourselves alone with a stranger, or have we been locked up with someone we love? Think of a honeymoon, a time when a couple in love desire to spend time alone with no one else around them to disturb their getting to know each other. They isolate themselves from friends and family, work and even church yet don't notice it, because their focus is on each other. Are we in prison or on honeymoon? It really depends on our love for the person in the room.

For love to be true love, biblical Agape love, there needs to be sacrifice. Our love for God is not measured by warm fuzzy emotional feelings, but by the sacrifices we are willing to make to maintain that relationship. The more we are willing to sacrifice ourself the greater our love; it is a literal laying down of our lives that shows true love towards our Heavenly Father (John15v13). As Christians we talk about giving our lives to the Lord but often say those words with very little depth. It's a nice thought rather than a reality.

In 1 Peter 4v1, Peter writes about suffering in the body as being following in the attitude of Christ. For when Jesus said "He was the Way" (John14v6), he was not just talking about the forgiveness of sins through his blood shed on the cross. He was talking about us walking in the same ways and attitudes as Christ did; being willing to die to the things of this world, to lose them, to sacrifice them, for the will of the Father; to endure the battle against sin for the joy of knowing the Father. To paraphrase the writer in Hebrews who says of Jesus; he was looking forward to the reunion with the Father with joy and so was able to endure the current pain of the cross (Hebrews 12v2). That is the example that we are to follow.

Jesus said:

The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life (John 12v25).

Are we willing to lose our lives and freedoms for the Lord? The writer to the Hebrews talks about their willingness to accept suffering and loss as a sign that they had been looking forward to eternal things (Hebrews 10v32-34). The battle against sin means battling, imprisoning ourselves from those things the flesh desires, not just the big headlines sins, the murder, stealing etc, but the really big sin, my selfishness, my rebellion and pride. The "me first" attitude that lacks any sacrifice.

Our confinement, our loss of the freedom to do what we want when we want is actually a great spiritual picture of the sacrificial Christian life, the Christ like life. Are we willing to put to death and refuse the flesh its desires and rebellion because we value our spiritual life? Our battle against the ways of this world and the desires of the flesh mean that we have to imprison and restrict the flesh that we may have a honeymoon with the Father. Is this period going to be a honeymoon with the one we love? Or are we locked up alone with a stranger? Those on honeymoon do not go stir crazy, instead they treasure their confinement, and remember the special dedicated time with the one they love for years to come.

Letter 4: The Church in Penitentiary

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

2 Corinthians 7v10

Another word for prison is "penitentiary", a word that comes from the Latin Paenitentia that means repentance. The idea was that individuals would spend time in a place to think about the crimes they had committed and come to a place of repentance.

As a youngster my Mother would use the same technique, after the hand of learning had made contact with the seat of understanding, I would be sent to my room to think about what I had just done. The idea was that I would come to a place of repentance, not a place of sorrow. Sorrow, is about being caught, it's not about a change of attitude. It's sorrow about the punishment. Repentance is about the harm I have caused to another, in our case the Lord. It is a sorrow that no longer wants to cause that hurt and pain and so leads to a change of attitude, a change of action, a change of direction from the ways of rebellion to the ways of obedience, even when that obedience comes at a cost to us and our own fleshly desires (John 15v9-14).

Penitentiary, the idea of sending someone to a place far away to think things over is very Biblical. God has used it in the past with the Israelites and can often use it in our lives although sadly we are often blind to it. So let us think about the current situation we find ourselves in from the viewpoint of the penitentiary.

Over the last few weeks I have heard many Christians talking about this being a judgment on the world, we have seen our economies ruined, our power and wealth shown to be of little value in the face of an enemy so small it can only be seen under a microscope. At times like this it is as if Christians are sitting in judgement, looking down and saying "We told you so". Much as there may be some truth in that, this week we are going to think about the Church in Penitentiary.

One of the things that Christians like to forget is that "Jesus was and is the Way" (John 14v6). His life, his daily walk was not just a path to the cross; it was an example of how we are to live. As Paul said: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11v1). Jesus lifestyle and attitude was an example of the way that His church was to walk, it was to be the life attitude by which we live (Philippians 2v5-11). It is very easy as Christians, as the Church, to assume that all is well and that we are all going in the right direction. What we are not good at is taking a good look at ourselves, a good sober reality check (Romans 12v3). Jesus walked in humility, humble obedience before the Father, and he was the Son of God. Sadly humility and obedience easily get replaced by pride and worldly wisdom that can easily get twisted to look as if they are good things (Genesis 3v5). This leaves us thinking we are going in the right direction when actually we have got lost along the way and the consequences of this are very serious, eternally serious. In Matthew 7v21-23 the Lord is talking about those who are busy doing stuff in the church,

people with successful ministries, recognised by those around them, yet walking in disobedience and following their own desires and ideas, instead of what God desires. They do not take the time to listen and wait on the Lord, but instead either telling God what needs to happen and how they want Him to bless their plans or assuming they already know what He wants without them even asking.

Thankfully we serve a patient God who wants the best for us, but that best requires repentance (2 Peter 3v8-10). So let us take a sober look at the current church situation and ask the Lord to humble our hearts and open our eyes as we remember the words of Peter: "Judgement begins with the family of God, the church" (1 Peter 4v17), what is the Lord doing with us?

In the Old Testament, when the Israelites disobeyed, the Lord warned them, and when they had turned a deaf ear to Him he would send an oppressor, famine or disease on His people to get their attention. However, just like us, instead of hearing what the Lord was saying and repenting, they would instead cry out for deliverance, not understanding that this situation was to get their attention. Sadly they didn't understand, their spiritually deaf ears could not hear what the Lord was saying and nothing changes (Revelation 2v7, 2v11, 2v17, 2v29, 3v6, 3v13, 3v22) God calls out to his church knowing that many will be deaf to His words. Jesus had the same problem as he preached to the crowd, so often they heard what they wanted to hear and saw what they wanted to see, missing the whole point of the teaching that lay before them (Matthew 11v15, 13v9, 13v15). Still the people kept on offering their sacrifices and turning up at the temple as if nothing had happened, blind and deaf to the spiritual peril that lay right in front of them.

Eventually when all else had failed God, as a loving disciplining Father, He sent His people into exile. He sent them away from His temple, away from the place of sacrifice. He spread them out among the nations making fellowship between Gods people harder. He sent them into a penitentiary, a place for them to come to repentance and understand how far they had drifted from the Lord.

As a church, as we look closely at the situation we find ourselves in today. We may not realise it, but we are in exile. We have been driven away from the place of sacrifice, but haven't noticed it. Instead we have made ourselves a covering of fig leaves (Genesis 3v7-11). We continue as if nothing is wrong, our services are online, we fellowship via WhatsApp and put a brave face on things while we ask the Lord to put things back to the way they used to be, not realising that we have been driven away from the Lord's Table, for no longer can we share together in the Lord's Supper. That physical reminder of Christ crucified is the time when we examine ourselves and check that we are running on the right course (1 Corinthians 11v23-32). We might not see the full significance of this but spiritually this is huge blow. Over the years the church has often gone through persecution in different times and places. Other struggles have come upon parts of the church that have prevented it from meeting together. However, never in history has there been a time when the church has been stopped on a worldwide scale as it has happened today. Of even more significance is the timing of this event as it locked us away during the Easter

period, for Christians the most important time of the year, a time when communion is taken more than at any other time in the church calendar. If that doesn't get our attention and open our eyes and ears then we are in a far bigger mess than we realise.

When the early church was dealing with sin and lack of repentance, one of the instructions was to expel the immoral brother (1 Corinthians 5v9-11); to remove the unrepentant from the church to purify it. The important part to note is at the end of verse 11 it says "With such a man do not even eat". This is much more than just having someone round for a meal, this is about removing that person from communion. Not allowing them to participate in the Lords Supper. Symbolically it is saying that the expelled person is no longer walking in Christ and is taking the action of 1 Corinthians 11v29 for them.

Sadly this part of church life will not even be missed by many of those who claim to be God's people. Today the "worship" is far more important to us, communion, the remembrance of the sacrifice that was made and the challenge for us to follow in the footsteps of Christ crucified has been pushed to the side. Instead of self examination and repentance before the Lord, we want to go away feeling encouraged and built up in our self worth. The true worship of living sacrifice (Romans 12v1) has been replaced with a desire for self. "Seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6v33) shows the Lordship of Christ in our lives. This has been replaced with a new gospel that is all about God serving our needs. Without realising it we now demand a seat at the table, we expect to be listened to and pampered by our new servant, God. This cannot be and so now we find ourselves in exile.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29v11).

This verse is a one that is often quoted to those going through tough times; sadly it is often quoted out of context, for it is part of a passage that was written to the Israelites who the Lord had sent into exile, far from the temple and the place of sacrifice because of their disobedience and sin. The false prophets, deaf and blind to the truth, had promised them a quick return (Jeremiah 28), but the Lords word to his people was that this exile would last 70 years (Jeremiah 29v10), and the plans that God had for His people was not that he would just get them out of exile, but the blessing of Jeremiah 29v11 is shown in the following three verses (Jeremiah 29v12-14). His people would be brought back when they had learnt to truly call on Him with a right heart attitude; an attitude that put the Lord central in their lives, rather than an "add on" to their existing lives; an "all their heart" attitude, putting God in His rightful place, lifting Him up above the things of this world.

So let us carefully consider our ways and the ways of the church and remember that this is not all about the world; it is about us! Let us remember the lessons of Matthew 7v1-5 and ask the Lord to remove the plank in the eyes of His people that

we may see clearly and realise the truth of the times. Pride looks down and blames others; humility takes a good inward look.

When God gave the great prophet Daniel revelation into the exile situation he found himself in, he did not look around and start blaming others. Instead he humbled himself before the Lord and recognised his sin and the sin of the Lords people (Daniel 9v1-11). It is an example that we would do well to follow.

It is easy to get things in the wrong order, to look at the size of the world, and then see the church being carried along by it and reducing God to someone looking on and having the odd influence on the situation. Let us get the order correct. God is central, and then He works and disciplines His people who in turn reach out to the world. When God moves, He starts working downwards. It's why we see in the Old Testament the importance of the King following after God, for when he went astray he led Israel in a wrong direction and in turn showed the nations around a wrong picture of godly living. God does not change, and sadly neither do men's hearts. The same issues that led the Israelites astray are the same issues we face today (1 Corinthians 10v13).

So let us take our eyes off the world, let us stop trying to deflect the issue onto what others have done and instead realise that we are now in exile and in this penitentiary the Lord is looking for his people to humble themselves and come before Him in repentance, then just like in the days of Jeremiah He will once again lift us up and bring us back to a place of communion (James 4v10).

Let us take some time over these coming days to ask the Lord for some clarity, we have plenty of time to seek Him. The question is "Will we seek Him?", or will we just look for someone else to do the seeking for us? Some of these things touch on subjects we don't like to think about, but if we don't consider these things, our time in exile will have been in vain.

"He who has an ear, let him hear".

Letter 5: The Church in Penitentiary Part 2

Jeremiah 13v1-19

The book of Jeremiah can be a tough read; Jeremiah virtually alone, speaking the word of God, but being rejected by the people who claimed to be God's people. Despite his constant warnings of the coming exile, he spoke in vain to a people who had become so convinced that all was well, that it was almost impossible for them to hear what the Lord was saying. For the sin of pride is the root of just about every other sin, for pride already knows. Pride lifts us up in our own eyes and alters our perspective of how we see ourselves and others around us including God himself. Pride allows us to slip from the position of humble servants and gives us a self confidence that raises us up to being equal or above God himself.

Satan, who had himself rebelled against God because of his pride and conceit (1 Timothy 3v6), taught Adam and Eve to follow in his ways. He taught them to lift themselves up, to view being equal with God as a good thing, something to be desired. However, as we see ourselves equal with God it also means that we learn to challenge God's words with those great phrases "Did God really say?" (Genesis 3v1) and "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3v4). For when we are equals we are no longer under authority, instead our new viewpoint as an equal means the other persons word is devalued and becomes something that we will take into consideration rather than obey outright. We treat it as more of a guideline, a suggestion, rather than a commandment, for if someone is our equal how can they have authority to command us? This is the subtle danger of pride, it is a deadly spiritual cancer that starts to destroy and mutate our spiritual lives, taking root and then spreading to the next area.

As we see in this passage in Jeremiah, the linen belt, despite being something that should have been tied around the Lord's waist had become ruined because of pride that had led to a refusal to listen. As soon as we refuse to listen, spiritually we may not realise it, but we are as good as dead; for a servant cannot serve if he first does not listen to the word of instruction from his master. Without listening he works on an assumption that "he knows" what his master wants. In other words, his knowledge has become equal with God so he no longer needs to seek him. Once this becomes a habit, we very quickly reduce ourselves to the attitude that we are serving God because what we are doing is for Him, yet we have not asked if this is what He wants us to be doing. We need to remember that there are many servants in the house and the master assigns tasks to each servant. It is too easy for us to see something and assume that we are the ones for that job. In our pride and presumption, we assume instead of seek. Another presumption that goes with this is we assume in our pride that we are ready and prepared to take up the role we think needs to be filled. Again the danger is that we step out of the Lords plan for our lives, running ahead of the Lord. What we forget is that when we run ahead of the Lord, we have turned our backs to him, we have set ourselves above God.

As we look at the life of Jesus, the humble servant (Philippians 2v6-8), one of the key elements of his life was a constant seeking after the Father. His spiritual food was doing His will (John 4v34), he was not walking around doing whatever he wanted, and he was not working to his own agenda or the agenda of the people around him. He was walking according to the Father's agenda, the servant heart walking in obedience. It is why at times we see Jesus do things that to a modern church would see crazy.

In Matthew 8v18, Jesus sees the crowds coming and gives orders to move away from them. We see this in other places such as Matthew 16v20 when Jesus says not to tell anyone who he was. These are just a couple of examples in the life of Jesus when he did the opposite of what we would think would be the way to go.

For us in a Matthew 8v18 situation, we would assume that a crowd is coming so let's start preaching to the crowds and have some more miracles. Yet without the servant heart this is not the work of God, but the manipulation of man. Matthew 7v21-23 is seen in action, works, but not based on the fruit of the Spirit, for the true fruit of the Spirit always starts with humility that leads to obedience. This is the core of the Christian walk, it's called repentance. The Lord speaking, us listening and taking His word to heart that leads to a change of direction, a walk of obedient servitude.

Sadly as pride comes in, our hearts harden and this servant heart attitude leaves. Our hearts become like the path in the parable of the sower (Mark 4v1-20) and the word of God is no longer able to penetrate and take root. We may continue to do "good things", we may continue in ministry, but the servant heart has gone. It is the story of the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2v1-7. Here we read of a church that is doing the "right stuff", persevering, enduring, throwing out false teaching, but over the years their love had grown cold. They had a love for the church, for ministry, for the teachings of God. If they hadn't, they would have stopped doing these things. Yet this was a church that had lost contact with God himself. They had started to serve the things of God rather than God himself; without realising it their relationship with the Father had grown cold to the point that the Lord warns them that their lamp stand will be removed (Revelation 2v5). Their church (Revelation 1v20), would be removed and no longer shine the light of God on those around. The light in the darkness would go out and they would be as much in the dark as those around them.

It is not the only time God has talked about the lights going out. In Malachi 1v10 God wishes that someone would shut the doors of the temple because the sacrifices being made there had become contemptible in the eyes of God (Malachi 1v6-9). In the New Testament we read the same thought in 1 Corinthians 11v17. Notice in both cases this is to do with treating the sacrifice with contempt. This is the word of God to His people, not to the world. The thought of God shutting the church seems absurd, but if we are not doing the will of God, if we have lost our humble sacrificial servant heart towards God, then what message are we preaching and whose church have we become. In Revelation 3v9 God calls them a "Synagogue of Satan"; an incredible description of part of the church. Yet if we are walking in disobedience to the Spirit of God, who are we walking in obedience to? If we reject God's command

and leading, then without realising it we are no longer followers of Christ crucified and instead have become followers of the "Did God really say".

As we think about the lamp stand being removed, the light going out, we need to think about what the Lord is saying. In the tabernacle the lamps needed to be kept burning in the darkness. Symbolically God's light was shining in the darkness, the testimony of God giving light to those around. A beacon of hope, a place to aim for to find the truth of God.

How did the lamp stand work? it needed a constant flow of oil to burn. Not just any oil, it was a pure oil (Exodus 27v20), clear and unpolluted so that it would flow without sticking. It was something that the Lord asked for before the lamp stand was built (Exodus 25v6 & 31). For the lamp stand without oil was nothing more than an ornament.

For us as Christians that pure oil comes through our constant drawing close to God and walking in obedience. The Holy Spirit does not flow when we walk in disobedience, sin; The Holy Spirit leads and guides us as we humble ourselves and walk in obedience. The idea of walking in the Spirit while walking in sin is a total contradiction of God's word. It's one of those "Did God really say", "You won't surely die". The only way the spirit moves when we are in disobedience is to convict us of sin, to lead us to repentance that takes us safely back on the right path. Sadly in our pride we reduce the walking in obedience that Gods word talks about to the idea that as we have not broken a legalistic commandment, we haven't killed or committed adultery, that all is well. Yet we forget that in our pride we have raised up another God, ourselves. We may think we have kept the later commandments, but have missed the first. "You shall have no other Gods before me." (Exodus 20v3), the trap our pride lets us fall into is that we raise ourselves up to the level of God.

Now as believers, with all the activity and business of life and church removed, we are now in that place of quiet and we are able to see our spiritual life without the business of the church. Now with all the extras removed we are able to take a closer look at our relationship with the Father.

Are we able to hear from God directly, or have we come to rely on external sources, preachers, teachers and books?

Do we look to others to be able to lead and direct us in the ways we should be going or again are we able to be led by the Holy Spirit?

Does our relationship with God fade when we are away from other believers?

Is my spiritual life built around the business of the church week or around the quiet time with the Lord?

Are we walking in the pride of what we know and once did, not realising that our relationship with Him has faded over the years.

We may think we are strong, we may think that our churches are strong, but the real strength of the church is not in its numbers or the noise it can make on a Sunday. The real strength of the church is in the individual relationships that we all have with the Father. For the strength of the church is not found in people. The strength of the church is only found in the Lord. Our pride at these times always lifts us up, yet it's in humility that the truth and the Lords grace is found.

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7v14

Letter 6: The Blame Game

Genesis 3v1-24

Over the last couple of weeks we have looked at the idea of the church being in penitentiary. A place of restriction and limitations put on us to bring us to our senses and get us moving back in the right direction; let us remember that's God's discipline is not about Him venting His anger on His children but about making them Christ like and guiding them into the true blessings that come through godly living (Hebrews 12v10). We have especially looked at the dangers of pride, because pride is the great spiritual killer, the main attribute of Satan himself that leads to rebellion against God, an attribute he loves to pass on to all his followers as opposed to Christ who leads us in humility that leads us through repentance to servanthood towards our Heavenly Father.

In Genesis 3v1-24 we read of the fall of man, we read of how man's pride led him to rebel against God and the consequences of that fall. It's important to look again at these things, especially in the light of our current situation, as it helps us to see why we react in the way that we do to situations and how we deal with our failings before God and man.

One of the great lies that we all like is the idea that it's not our fault, someone else is to blame. In the situation of Adam and Eve, we see as a result of sin a progression of blame. First Adam blames Eve for his sin (Genesis 3v12). When Eve was questioned about her actions, she blamed the serpent (Genesis 3v13) and as the old joke goes, "The serpent didn't have a leg to stand on!" It might sound strange, but Satan was the only one who didn't blame anyone else. He knew his heart was rebellious and made no excuses for it. Adam and Eve however went down a very different route; they went down the route of blame; each claiming to be the innocent party led astray by someone else and denying the truth of their own rebellion.

This blame attitude is important because it is one of the first fruits of spiritual death, sin, for the blame that we see here is actually deception and works in the same way the Devil does, for it is the fruit of walking in obedience to Satan's ways, it is the spiritual fulfilment of John 8v44; it is literally becoming and living in the ways of Satan. So let us take a closer look at what is going on.

In John 16v8-14, Jesus talks about the work of the Holy Spirit. The most basic element of the work of the Holy Spirit is to convict of sin and lead us in the way of righteousness. The two are complete opposites, sin leads to disobedience and rebellion against God, while Godly conviction by the Holy Spirit leads us to humble repentance that leads to a change of life direction. This is a basic foundation of the Christian life (Hebrews 6v1). It means that we have heard the Holy Spirit speaking into our lives and our response has been to humbly admit our sin and rebellion against God himself and so we turn to the ways of godliness (2 Corinthians 7v10). This is the basics of walking according to the Spirit. Forget talking in tongues and

other spiritual gifts, the foundational basis of walking according to the Spirit is to listen and change direction as the Spirit leads.

The problem is that a battle rages within us. Our rebellious flesh fights for its very survival by trying to kill the leading of the Holy Spirit. For if we live according to the Spirit then the flesh gets put to death, that flesh is our selfish desire, our pride. It is summed up by Jesus in Matthew 16v24 - 26 and is an ongoing battle that will be with us for the rest of our spiritual lives and is described very well by Paul in Romans 7v7-20 as he talks about his battle with sin.

Now the important lesson for us here is the attitude of Paul in his battle against sin. Who does he blame for his failings? No one! He's recognises his failings as his failings. He doesn't try blaming the church, lack of teaching or even the Devil. Instead he recognises that his failings are caused by the desires of the flesh that rage within him and so we see him living out the words of 1 John 1v5-9. As Paul walked in the light, as he had fellowship with the Father, the light shone in the dark places of his life and he accepted his failings bringing them before the Father with no excuse or blame. He walked in the light and the blood of Jesus purified him from his sin. It didn't mean he found it easy; he fought the same battle we all should be fighting, but because he fought, God's grace and mercy were being poured out on him as he humbly came before the Lord (James 4v6-7). Notice in James it talks about resisting the Devil, resisting the temptation that he puts before us.

Too often, instead of resisting the Devil, we actually follow in his footsteps. Instead of walking in the light of the truth of our sinfulness which leads to repentance, we walk in darkness (1 John 1v10). Instead of Godly repentance we deny the truth and walk in satanic deception. We claim that it's not our fault and that the issue lays elsewhere, we make an excuse for our rebellion. Our self righteousness that comes from our pride rejects conviction and instead starts to work on a deception to take the spotlight off us. Put basically, we lie! We lie to ourselves (1 Corinthians 6v9-10, James 1v22) telling ourselves that it's alright to continue as we are and it's often at this point we will look for another believer to justify our sin (2 Timothy 4v3). We will look for people to tell us what we want to hear and then of course we follow in the ways of Satan by deceiving others. We become preachers of evil, justifying our sin, deceiving others around us to follow and join in with our deception (2 Timothy 3v3v13). Very quickly we lead others into following in our ways, deceiving others and encouraging them to walk in the way of rebellion, the "Did God really say" (Genesis 3v1) soon breeds and spreads to bring about the full walk of the sinful nature as seen in Galatians 5v19-21. Rather than preaching Christ crucified we have become encouragers of sin and rebellion against God himself. It is no wonder scripture talks about anti Christs within the church (1 John 2v18-19, 2 John 1v7), they preach and encourage the ways of the flesh rather than Christ crucified lifestyle. Notice in 1 John 2v18 that it warns us of "many". It would be good to examine ourselves to make sure we are one of the "few" rather than the "many", for the "many" it is talking about are inside the church and as it tells us in Matthew 7v15-23, not only are they just saying what we want to hear, but as part of the "many" the Lords reaction to them will be "I never knew you"; For we never knew His ways.

For this is the last part of our deception, once we have deceived ourselves and deceived others we think that we will in turn be able to deceive God himself. Let us take a warning from Genesis 3. God was not fooled by the deception and the blame game of Adam and Eve and will not be deceived by us. The idea that we can deceive God shows just how much pride has taken root within us; we think that we can outwit God himself. If we think we are going to mock God in this way we truly deceive ourselves (Galatians 6v7-8).

Christians love to blame; if we cannot find a person, we will blame the Devil himself. Let us be very clear, Satan cannot cause you to sin. He does not take control of you; he does not put a gun to your head and threaten you. He just offers you the desires of your flesh and we take it, abandoning the leading of the Holy Spirit. If we want to defeat the deception of the enemy of our souls the solution is simple:

"Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the Devils schemes (deceptions)."
Ephesians 6v11

This means staying close to the Father, wrapping ourselves in Him that his armour then covers us as well. Too many want to put on the armour of God without God being present. As part of that armour we need to be constantly listening to the leading of the Spirit, allowing our eyes and ears to be opened to the revelation that He wants to bring us and walking in obedience.

"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you."
James 4v7

As we look at the temptations of Jesus in Matthew 4v1-11, we see that Jesus was tempted in exactly the same ways that we are, yet was without sin (Hebrews 4v15). He stuck close to the Father; he constantly crucified the flesh to walk according to the Spirit. He made no excuses for himself that would allow him to surrender his will to Satan, instead he continued in daily obedience to the directions of the Father, bringing glory to His name.

It is very easy to play the blame game, both individually and as the church, the body of Christ. It is attractive to us because it allows us to keep our pride, our desire not to be seen to have failed before others and God himself. For blame denies the fault within and passes it on to another. However the truth is that if we have gone the wrong way, it is down to the desires of our heart being dangled in front of us and us allowing our flesh to chase after those desires. For that we have no one to blame but ourselves (James 1v13-15) and that requires humility.

If we want the Holy Spirit to lead, guide and teach us, then we have to be willing to accept the truth and walk humbly according to the light. If every time the light shines on us our pride makes an excuse for walking in the darkness, then sadly we will never understand the things that the Holy Spirit is trying to teach and lead us in.

So what excuse can we offer? None! Our excuses are our pride rebelling against God so let us stop the blame game and allow the Holy Spirit to do a work of purification in our lives.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that by Christ Jesus.
John 3v23-24

Letter 7: Do I have your attention now?

Colossians 1v15-20

Last week we looked at the "Blame Game", the tendency we have to blame others for our own failings. However at the same time we do the same thing when it comes to the misfortune of the world or those around us. Again it can't be their fault, it must be some outside power, so let's find someone or something we don't like and blame them. We see this today with the Coronavirus, politicians love to play the blame game. Flavour of the month is that China somehow created it and let it out of the lab. For some believers it's all the work of the Devil and his hordes that need to be rebuked and put back into their box. In both cases someone important has been missed out, God! In fact the only ones who seem to blame God are those who say "Why would God let something like this happen?" As if somehow, they think that God Almighty would never do or allow something like this, sadly a view that many Christians take.

So let's take a bit of a step back and put God back on the throne and recognise Him for who He is; The creator of heaven and earth! All things have been created by Him and for Him! Let us remember those words of Colossians 1v16, "All Things". We may have our conspiracy theories, but I can assure you that God Almighty has been awake the whole time. He is the creator, not man, not the Devil. When it comes to life it always stems from God right down to the smallest virus. This is what the Bible is trying to tell us in Genesis Chapters 1 & 2. God creates; it is Him that puts life into all parts of creation. From the birds in the air to the depth of the seas, from pole to pole, God has created and maintains His creation. The Apostle Peter did not go running into God to wake him from his sleep to let him know that a virus had broken out and was making its way around the world; God himself was on the throne controlling and knowing every step and effect that would take place. This is important for us to understand because without this understanding we will be deceived and start looking and blaming the wrong person or people. After all there is no point trying to bind the Devil for something he hasn't created and isn't controlling.

All we are doing is being deceived and allowing ourselves to raise him up to the level of God by first saying he is a creator and second saying he is the controller. In doing so we declare that he has more control than God himself and by saying he is a creator we raise him up to being equal with God, the very thing that he has desired from the start for in raising him up we lower God, for if Satan is in control, then God has been defeated by him as we declare that God's will is subject to Satan's. The glory of ruling heaven and earth belongs to the Lord and He has no plans to share that glory with anyone else (Isaiah 42v8). God is in command and is ruling right down to the last detail of our lives and the smallest part of his creation including microscopic viruses (Matthew 10v29-31).

This is a very important concept for us to understand and goes against a lot of the teaching of "God being a loving God so He would never do such a thing". God is a

loving God, but his love is greater than our ideas of love. God's character is summed up in love, but that character and therefore that love is made up of all the attributes of God. His peace, grace, mercy, forgiveness, patience, perseverance, goodness, faithfulness and self control and the other bits we like are all part of that love, but so too are His justice, wrath, judgement, righteous anger and holiness. These are just some of the attributes of God, but without all of them we create for ourselves a false God. We create a God who we assume thinks and acts as we do, again from Genesis 3v5, we think we have become like God knowing how He should act towards us and the world around us; assuming that we know what He would and would not do and creating a false God in our own image.

This idea of making God as an image of what man wants is seen throughout the Bible. It is the essence of what God was trying to teach the Israelites in the commandments in Exodus 20v3-4; the warning was not to make a God in the image of anything else. For that God would be a false God and when we worship that God we worship an idol, an image of the real God. What is an image? It's a work of our imagination. It's not the real thing, but a picture created and manipulated by man to look how we want it to look. Notice this commandment was not given to the world first; it was given to God's people, they had to live as a testimony before the world.

God took this sort of thing very seriously and warned His people of the consequences in Exodus 20v5-6. He does not say that He will allow others to take control and punish us, but makes it quite clear that He will be in control of the punishment, no matter what tool He chooses to use and that the tool He chooses is unlikely to be what we would expect. A classic example of this is the Apostle Paul in Acts 9v15. God describes Paul as "His chosen instrument"; the tool that He had decided to use for His purposes. Would Paul have been the first choice of the church? I doubt it. He was the one who was persecuting them and throwing them into jail (Acts 9v13). He was happy to see Stephen stoned to death (Acts 8v1). Yet this was the man that God chose to take His message of salvation to the Gentiles.

When it comes to God's discipline, we see that He uses an assortment of things to get our attention when we go astray. As we read in the book of Judges He used invaders (Judges 3v7-8, Judges 3v12, Judges 4v1-2). Notice each time it is the Lord who is totally in command using the tool that He sees fit for the job. We see another set of tools that God uses in 2 Chronicles 7v13-14, drought, famine, locusts and plagues now including Coronavirus. God used these things at different times to get His people's attention and draw them back on to the right path, for God's priority is saving of lives for eternity rather than the prolonging of man's mortality. The sacrifice of life for the salvation of others has always been at the centre of God's ways and is summed up in the death of Christ on the cross. It's a sacrifice that has to be voluntary, for if the sacrifice is not freely given it is no longer a freewill offering but a forced theft. This is important because one of the great complaints that God had against the Israelites was that they sacrificed their lives to other Gods. In other words they would lay down their lives and their goods in the pursuit of other Gods even though He was the one who had set them free. This is summed up in Ezekiel

16v1-63 when God lays before His people the full extent of their sin, it is a chapter that we read and then think to ourselves: "How could they do that?"

However, the heart of man does not change unless the Lord is allowed to do a work in it and that means that the same things that happened then happen now. So let's take a quick look through the chapter and see how many of the charges relate to the church today.

Ezekiel 16v1-14 is a great picture of how God took his people out of the world. They did not come from a special line or a deserving people; instead he took them as a sinful unwanted people and made them into his own. It goes on to explain how the Lord made a covenant with His people; this is important because in a covenant all that we have is there to support the other party in their time of need. People often reduce a covenant to a simple contract but it is far deeper. If I enter into a contract to pay someone a sum of money to do a job or to buy an item then that is the sum I am liable to pay. If suddenly the person I am in a contract with says that he has other needs, they are not something I have made an agreement to provide for. My agreement, my contract, is just to pay for the services or goods that have been agreed. In contrast a covenant is much deeper, it is an agreement to support each other with everything we have at our disposal which in the case of God Almighty is a lot. It is not limited to what I feel I can afford or helping out when I am in the mood, it is about everything I am and have is there to support the other party in their time of need. The greatest display of this is of course Jesus at the cross, giving everything he was and everything he had right down to his underwear. He fulfilled his side of the covenant by giving all of himself, physically, spiritually and emotionally. He even gave up his mother to fulfil his part of the covenant. So when God says He entered into a covenant with His people it is a very serious commitment towards them.

In Ezekiel 16v9-13 we see how He provided for all their needs. We can at this point so easily reduce this to just their physical food and clothes, but when we look at things spiritually we realise that He was feeding them and clothing them through his word. The same is true today with the church, his people. We see the same concept in Ephesians 5v25-27, the cleansing that comes through the word of God. Not as an intellectual knowledge of scripture, but as a life that is lived in obedience to that word. It is this act of pouring out His word, showing us the way that leads to repentance that removes the spots, blemishes and wrinkles from the church and at the end creates a radiant church; a church that shines out in the world as a reflection of the work that the Lord has done. All this beauty that we read about in Ephesians and Ezekiel came not from Israel or the church but was lavished upon them by God through the cleansing of His word. Just like the radiant church in Ephesians 5v25-27 that is then seen and respected by the world, so Israel also became famous because of the splendour of God that dwelt among them.

It is at this point we see the change, the start of the downfall, both of historical Israel and of the church today. We forget who we are, mere sinners saved by grace; a people who reflect the glory of God because we humbly serve Him and trust in Him for our needs; for it is Christ in us that gives the church power and authority, the

working and leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives that shows the power of God. Instead pride starts to come in and we start to bask in our own glory enjoying the praise of men and becoming addicted to their praise. As a simple example of this, I was watching an interview with a musician who had made a fortune through his music and had no need to work or play ever again. When asked why he continued to tour around the world he explained that there was nothing like the experience of thousands of fans calling out his name in adoration. That man, without realising it, has become a prostitute to the desire for praise, he was willing to sacrifice his home life to fulfil that need within.

The danger for the church, as has been seen over the years, is that when it goes in the right direction it starts to draw praise and when our pride receives it we want more. It is the same with signs and wonders, God moves, the miraculous happens and people hear about it and raise us up and at that point we start to sell ourselves to that fame, that lifting up and will do anything to keep it coming, not realising that we are now worshipping another God. Instead of our reputation and standing before the Lord being our priority (Matthew 6v33), our concern becomes about how we will be seen and perceived by others; how we will stay in their favour. It is at this point, as our eyes drift from the Lord that we start to prostitute ourselves to the foreign Gods of this world. To maintain the relationship and keep everyone happy we start to walk along the broad road of compromise (Matthew 7v13-14). We start to offer our ways to the world. We start to dress like them (Ezekiel 16v16), losing our righteous robes as we compromise to keep everyone happy. The sacrifices that should have been made for the Lord are instead poured out to serve false Gods (Ezekiel 16v18).

A difficult part of this process is that it tends to take a period of time for the drift to take place. If you look through the book of Judges an event would happen, the people would call for deliverance and the Lord would send a judge. The primary job of the judge was not to slay the enemy, but to lead the people back into obedience to the Lord, leading by example. As that judge listened and followed the instructions of the Lord, He moved through that judge and the people experienced God's deliverance for themselves as once more they became free. Sadly as time passed they drifted back into their old ways and if we think we are any different today we deceive ourselves.

So how have we drifted as a church, and here we are thinking of the church nation wide and even world wide? Are we concerned more about what the Lord thinks or what the world thinks? Do we take our instruction and leading from man or from God and whose praise are we seeking?

One of the first things we need to watch out for is the desire to see the church grow numerically at any cost. That cost is more than financial, it is the cost of sacrificing the ways of the Lord; trying to make the church more appealing to the outside world. This tends to come under a couple of different traits; liberalism and materialism.

Liberalism is when we start to compromise on God's standards and accept sin as being alright. When Jesus gave the great commission in Matthew 28:19-20 he told the disciples to teach the people to obey the ways of God and sin is not the way of God. In the age we live in there has come about an extreme teaching on grace that gives the idea that God is not bothered about our sin because He will give more grace. In John 8:11 when Jesus is dealing with the woman caught in adultery he does not condemn her, but at the same time he does not condone her sin or make an excuse for her to carry on in that lifestyle. His final words to her "leave your life of sin" shows the truth of the gospel message. We are saved by God's grace and mercy, but saved from sin, in other words our new life is a life of repentance that is constantly trying to look more like the life of Christ. With liberalism we try to get the numbers in by dropping the standards and at this point we may not realise it, but the church has now become more important than the Lord and we start to lower the holiness of God into the gutter. Instead of following the command to be holy (1 Peter 1:16) we prostitute ourselves to the world and become like them to keep them happy. Let us always remember that the job of the church is not to save the world but to serve the Lord. The work of building the church is the Lord's (Matthew 16:18). The true church only grows when God's people walk in obedience.

The second trait, materialism, springs from the same root as liberalism. Again it's the idea of allowing people to continue to worship in their old ways and that by coming to God He will bless the worldly desires of their heart. In our prostitution we take the things that are for seeking the will of God and focus them on seeking the will and material gain of man. We see this in Ezekiel 16:19 with the fragrant incense being offered up. That incense represents the prayers of the saints (Revelation 8:4). Our prayer life that should be focused on seeking the will of the Lord instead becomes focused on seeking the will and desires of man. This has gone on for so long that it has become totally normal, instead of seeking the Lord's will and revelation in our lives (the focus of all of the Apostle Paul's prayers), our focus becomes people's physical well being and as it becomes more extreme produces the modern prosperity gospel. A gospel that takes the will and desire of God and replaces it with the will and desire of man and so once again we prostitute ourselves before a foreign God, absorbing the ways of the world.

Whenever there is true Godly revival in individuals or in groups of believers there are certain traits that are always seen. Prayer: The seeking after the will of God. Holiness that comes from repentance from sin and Obedience that comes by doing the will of the Lord.

Next week Lord willing we will continue to look at some of these ways in which we have fallen, for only when we realise that we have lost our direction do we start looking for the right direction.

Letter 8: Adding and taking away

Revelation 22v18-19

Last week we started to look at Ezekiel Chapter 16 and some of the charges God made against His people. Let us just be reminded again, "His people". We are not looking to judge the world for we cannot change the lives of others. The only life we can change is our own and through that change, God through His Holy Spirit is then able to minister unto others. As we saw in Letter 6: The Blame game, we have a tendency to want to deflect from our own issues by looking and pointing the attention towards others so as we continue to read through these things, let us keep in mind that it is about us and the part we play in the local church as well as the greater church that the Lord is speaking to us about.

We finished by touching on the subjects of Liberalism and Materialism and today we will continue on that theme. Each of them is a reaction of mans pride and the desires of his flesh to manipulate the word of God so that the flesh can get its desires. Although the two overlap in many ways, Liberalism tends to be more focused on the removing of what God said, so that we do not have to repent and turn from our sinful ways, while materialism adds to Gods word to allow us to seek what our flesh desires. Of course we have to remember that if you remove something you add something in its place and if you add something you remove the focus on to something else. Just like God Himself and all His works, His Word is an intricate balance and a true marvel. He is an Almighty God.

As we read last week in Ezekiel 16v15-19, Gods people started to take the worship and sacrifice that was supposed to be used for the worship of God and instead poured it out on their false gods, the idols, the desires of their hearts. On the liberal side we see this in areas such as marriage. Many Christians today think it is alright to desecrate the covenant of marriage; the life long union between a man and a woman. Now for many they will instantly start to point to the LGBT movement within the church; one of the things we have to note about this group is that it spends more time focusing on the Liberalisation of Gods word to justify their flesh desires that it does seeking to walk in obedience and crucifying the flesh. However, this group is a newish group and is the child of a different type of liberalisation that the church has allowed these days with almost no comment; that is the liberalisation of divorce within the church, please note this is about divorce after people have become saved, we cannot hold people accountable for failing the Lords instruction when they have not known the Lord.

As a young Christian even 35 years ago, divorce was frowned upon within the church. Now not only has it become accepted, but in a lot of the church it is not even an obstacle to leadership, despite the teaching of 1 Timothy 3v1-10. This is very

important because marriage before God is a covenant agreement. When we accept that breaking a covenant is acceptable, it then means that it becomes easier to accept the breaking of our covenant before the Lord.

For marriage, in its true form, is to be taught in the church by word and deed. It is why in 1 Timothy 3v2-4, when looking for leaders, they must manage their family well; this is not just about them being disciplined and obedient to their parents, but about being disciplined and obedient to the ways of God. If as leaders we are willing to accept divorce and water down the need for that covenant to be respected within the church, then that is what we teach to the next generation and if we teach that the marriage covenant is not to be respected as scripture tells us (Hebrews 13v4), then that is what we will breed into the next generation. We will sacrifice our children's spirituality to foreign gods so that we can get what we want, they may live on physically, but spiritually we are leading them astray. Once we have set them a precedent of the liberalisation of the Word of God is it any wonder that couples living together and same sex relationships have started to increase and in many cases are encouraged within the church. We have become like the Corinthian church and have become proud of our acceptance of these issues (1 Corinthians 5v1-2). No longer do we testify to the world the ways of righteousness, but instead have followed in their footsteps, desired their freedom to sin, and fought for it to be accepted in the church until we have become so used to it that the situation becomes normal.

As Gods people we have to understand that when we water down the Word of God, when in our pride we rebel against His word and alter it to our own desires, then that is what we teach our children to do. It is one of the interesting parts of 2 Kings. In 2 Kings 14v1, Amaziah a good king whose mother was from Jerusalem (representing God's people), 2 Kings 15v1-3 Azariah (in some versions Uzziah) is a good king, his mother was from Jerusalem, 2 Kings 15v8-9 Zechariah is a bad king, his mother was from Samaria (those going away from God's word). These kings had been taught by the examples of their parents and this had a huge effect on the direction in which their lives took. A similar thought is seen in Genesis 5v1-3, we see God created in his likeness, but the children of Adam grew up in the likeness of Adam, following in his ways. For once we start on the path of rebellion, that is what we teach and sacrifice our children to, both our physical (family) and spiritual (church) children. This is part of the reason for Gods teachings to Moses in Exodus 34v6-7. The Lord warned Moses of the results of making agreements with the people around them as they would finish up sacrificing their children by leading them astray (Exodus 34v15-16). When we go astray, the results have a knock on effect from generation to generation and the only answer to that curse comes through repentance and a turning back to Gods ways.

Marriage is a good example, but sadly there are many other areas where the church has liberalised its views towards sin until it is no longer seen as sin, our hearts have become totally hardened and unable to be penetrated by the Word of God (Matthew 13v19).

Just as there are huge dangers from liberalism, the same is also true for our other false god; materialism. For in materialism we change the word of God to allow us to follow after the material desires of our hearts, money and goods, or as it used to be called "Mammon".

This false God is one that has been allowed to invade the church to the point that we do not even notice it any more. It has become so accepted that it is normal in our conversations. When we greet each other, when we enquire as to how life is going, our focus tends to be on the physical. We think of health, houses, jobs, cars, computers and the other things of this world. Rarely is our first thought the spiritual side of life and what the Lord is doing which is what scripture encourages us to do (Ephesians 5v19, Romans 1v11-12). So in essence our first thought when we meet someone is to ask how the world is blessing them!

How often do we read of Jesus or the apostles asking about the material well being of those they are ministering to? The nearest we get to this is in 3 John 1v2 when John prays that Gaius would enjoy health and blessing in the world even as his soul was being blessed. So even here, John's priority was the spiritual well being of Gaius and his joy was in his spiritual walk, rather than his bank balance (3 John 1v3-4).

Firstly let us be clear that especially in the Western World, there is no idol worshipped more than the god of materialism. This God is worshipped so deeply that it is considered as important as life itself. It is one of the headline battles at the moment, the unlocking of the economy versus the desire to save lives. At what point are we willing to sacrifice lives for economic gain? It has been interesting to see how different nations and cultures have varying views on this subject, but let us be under no illusion as to what the underlying battle is; mammon and how much we are willing to sacrifice for it.

This desire for more is one of the fastest routes to falling away from God. In Genesis 2v8-17 we read how God created the Garden of Eden and filled it full of good quality fruit trees (Genesis 2v9); trees of blessing, trees that would give them more than enough to fulfil their physical need (Genesis 1v29). They had no need for any more and yet Satan in Genesis 3v2-6 tempts Adam and Eve with the desire for more than the Lord had already given them.

If our desire is for more of the things of this world, then what we are saying is that we are not satisfied with what we have. We declare that we need the physical to be fulfilled in life, put simply; the Lord is not enough for us. Our eyes are fixed on the blessings of this world and it then becomes the god of this world that we chase after, as Jesus said; "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6v24). The one we serve and make sacrifice to is the one we worship (Romans 12v1), be it God or Mammon. Do we want the things of this world or the things of God? When we are satisfied with what we have, we have contentment in our lives, we no longer have the need to strive for more and this is a great blessing (1 Timothy 6v6-10). The danger of the constant desire for more is that it becomes the focus of our lives, the driving force and the thing that occupies our thoughts. No longer are our eyes and

thoughts fixed on Jesus (Hebrews 3v1, 12v2) or on the spiritual, but our eyes are fixed on the ways of this world, and whatever our eyes and thoughts are fixed on, that is the direction our lives will go. As the god of materialism has been dragged into the church, we start to alter the Word of God to justify our worldly desires, and eventually twist things to say that God Himself desires these things for us. Before we know it, we start seeing God as a means to material gain and become a people robbed of the truth of Gods word (1 Timothy 6v5).

However, like liberalism, the effects of this false path not only influence our lives, but also the paths of our children (spiritual and physical). For when our desire is for success in this world, it becomes the doctrine we teach to our children. We become more concerned about their education and job opportunities than we do about their spiritual well being. When we talk to others about our children, it is not about their spiritual lives, but their material well being and our children start to see themselves judged in our eyes by how well they have done in this world. Without realising it we are teaching them that the ways of materialism are more important than the Kingdom of God. How sad that we are willing to sacrifice our children eternally to encourage them in the pursuit of the desire for more in this world.

This has a knock on effect that is far greater than we can imagine. A simple example is when I think back to when Liz and I first went out onto the mission field. I was amazed at how many Christians warned me of the dangers of ruining my career and the fact that it would have long term effects on our future such as buying a home or even having a pension. Their concern for my material well being may at first look as if they cared for me, but that care and concern was based on the material rather than the spiritual gain that comes through obedience to the call of God. As a side note, when I have talked to heads of missions one of the things they struggle with today is getting anyone to commit long term, people are happy to go out short term using up their holidays, but mission is no longer seen as a spiritual career path.

Sadly we now have large parts of the church that see materialism as being the will of God, who see God Almighty as some sort of spiritual cash machine whose only concern is our material greed. How sad it is that we have perverted the ways of God and missed the fact that Jesus had nothing and yet was the most successful man to walk the face of the earth; and it is him we are called to follow after.

For we need to understand the grave consequences for ourselves, and the generations to come, when we go down the roads of liberalism and materialism and as we encourage the next generations, by word and deed, to go astray. We fulfil a couple of verses in Ezekiel 16 that at first would fill us with horror. We sacrifice our children to foreign gods (Ezekiel 16v20-21). For in our desire to get what we want in this world we are willing to sacrifice our own children spiritual well being, for our desire for personal gain means we are willing to sacrifice their eternal direction, a hard concept for us to comprehend.

So let us take a look at our lives, are we allowing liberalism and materialism into our lives and thus into the church? Are we truly seeking first the Kingdom of God or are we jealously seeking the material blessings the world tempts us with?

Just a final thought on these things, because as we truly examine our lives and see what we have added and taken away, we can view ourselves as failures before God, and there is no denying the truth in that. However, let us also look at the positives, for when God gave these words in Ezekiel to Israel He did it to bless them.

Firstly, as we see the magnitude of our sin and our failings before God, we also see the depth of the love God has for us that in spite of our adultery and prostitution to the Gods of this world He still desires us and desires to see us cleansed and made holy, It is a love and patience that is beyond our understanding.

The second positive is that when we see we have gone astray we have a starting point; we know where we are and where we have to get to. For if in our pride, we do not see ourselves as lost, we will never consider changing direction. However, as we see our failings and turn from our false gods to the true and living God we will once again know His presence and blessing.

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7v14

Letter 9: Faith in a foreign god.

Luke 18v1-8

Over the last few weeks we have been looking through Ezekiel Chapter 16 and the warnings and lessons that need to be heeded from this passage in our lives today.

As we read through the chapter we see a constant prostitution to other gods, the gods of this world, the peoples that surrounded Israel, and a desire to have the perceived blessing that those people had as a way of fulfilling the needs of the flesh within.

This week we will take a look at who we see as our provider; for again it is so easy to say that we trust in the Lord yet by our actions we show that it is the world that we are looking to. The parable of the persistent widow is a reminder as we continue in Ezekiel that when it comes to seeking justice, deliverance or any other needs, our trust must be in the Lord, for when Jesus makes the statement:

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Luke 18v8

He's not just talking about a belief in God, but an active living faith. One of the lessons we need to learn from this parable is that the widow persisted in going to the judge over and over again. She didn't look elsewhere, didn't start getting a petition together or start arranging street protests. She knew very clearly who was responsible for sorting her case out and that was the one that she went to. She was single minded in her actions and by those actions she displayed clearly who she had put her faith in. Even when things did not seem to be proceeding at the speed she wanted, she did not change her focus, but continued to seek the judge alone. It is the true example of Psalm 40v1-2. The psalmist waited patiently on the Lord, where did he wait? He waited in the slimy pit; he waited for the Lord alone to lift him out. He didn't start to look at the time that was going by and decide to try a few other methods of getting out; he waited patiently for the Lord and for the Lord alone.

This is important for us, because at times we need to take a step back and see who or what we have put our faith in, for it is far easier to put our trust in the gods of this world than we may realise.

In Ezekiel 16v23-34, we see in verses 24 & 31 that adulterous Israel had made mounds for themselves and the shrines of their false gods. Now a mound may at first seem insignificant, but the purpose of the mound was to lift something up so that it could be seen from a distance and by more people. To build a mound was no easy task; in ancient times the only way to build a mound was by hand, it would take months, maybe years to complete. For those of us in Worcester, if we think of the earthworks required to build Whittington Tump or British Camp on the Malvern's, we realise the huge amount of effort that would be required; so when we read that a mound was built it means that serious effort was put into the endeavour at hand.

Now the first thing we see in Ezekiel 16v24 was that it says: "You built a mound for yourselves". Whatever was being put on the mound, whatever the purpose of that mound, we need to understand that self interest was the goal. Mounds, towers such as the tower of Babel (Genesis 11v1-9), have been built over the years to get peoples attention and to draw people in to look closer; it's done to lift us up and make us look important. If we look at the mainline railway stations in London we see how the different companies built huge ornate structures as a way of advertising their railway as being the best company to travel with. It was an expensive advertising board that boasted of what that company had to offer if people would use their services. We see it today with tempting introductory offers for phones, broadband and other utilities, each company lifting it's achievements up to draw us into a relationship with them. At the moment they are using the Coronavirus as a great advertisement by making themselves look generous towards key workers. They are not doing it out of the generosity of their hearts, they are doing it because we have something they want... our money and their money. Their goal is to gain what we have, to draw the unsuspecting individual into a relationship; that is the world of business, to sell yourself to your customers.

So when we read of these mounds we see Israel were exalting themselves and making their offerings clear to all those around to bring them into a relationship. Put simply, they were selling (prostituting) themselves to draw people into a relationship that would allow them to gain and get what they wanted. They made special offers (sacrifices) to gain what they wanted; we have seen them over the last couple of weeks in liberalism and materialism, sacrificing the ways of God to get the attention and wealth of the world. It all sounds a bit weird and theoretical so let us try and bring it down to the practical; we will start with ourselves as individuals first, and then look at the church.

"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself."
John 12v32

How often do we try to draw attention to ourselves? Wanting people to notice our abilities, needs, sacrifices, good works, even our spirituality! We do this because we want to be noticed, to be someone, to fulfil the flesh need within so we build the mound (make the effort) to lift ourselves and be noticed. We sacrifice, saying and doing what they want to hear and see so that we are recognised and in response we draw people in to fulfil our flesh desires; to "Want to be", to "Want to have", to have the attention of others, to be noticed, listened to and respected, even loved. Looking for a fulfilment through the things of this world and before we know it, we are sacrificing, selling ourselves, prostituting, to gain the approval of men; at this point we may not realise it, but we are sacrificing to foreign gods.

We also need to realise that this doesn't just happen in our worldly relationships. It also appears in our church relationships too with our desires to be seen or feel needed by the church. That is a very different thing to serving the Lord, even though they may look the same. Serving the Lord makes the sacrifice to lift Him up, it is not

about us gaining respect or standing in the eyes of men or even other brothers and sisters in the Lord. It's not about us being seen to be in successful ministry, it's about us being successful before the Lord, walking in simple obedience as a servant before Him even if no one else notices. As soon as we desire others to notice we start to lift ourselves up rather than the Lord, for when we want to be lifted up and noticed we need to be aware that it is pride that is at work, the great spiritual killer, for as we are warned in Exodus 20v26, when we lift ourselves up on steps the flesh is easily revealed, even when it looks like we are ministering for the Lord.

As an example, a few years ago a minister said to me that it must be nice to pastor a small church because you do not have to put so much effort into the messages because it's only a small congregation. I must admit I was left in shock at the statement for behind it lay another message; why waste time preparing if only a few are listening? In other words, I can only be bothered to put the effort in if I am going to receive the praises of men. We need to understand that our ministry is before the Lord and as we lift Him up men will be drawn in. When the desire is for us to be lifted up we may draw a crowd eager to hear what they want to hear (2 Timothy 4v3-4), yet not fulfil the Lords will, becoming loved and famous, even wealthy before men, yet bankrupt in the Lord.

Another example we see quite often is when someone starts to talk about their ministry, often desperate to hang on to a position. Their feeling of self worth, of the need to be someone is no longer bound up in the Lord but needs the approval of other believers. As servants of the Lord we have no ministry, just a calling, a position that the Lord has put us in to fulfil a work that He has for us, and when that time is over, as humble servants we just need to move on. That letting go is not always easy. After working in a small village in Poland for many years, visiting every few months and taking endless meetings to plant a church, there came a time when a fellowship suddenly came together. Just as the church grew the Lord spoke to me very clearly that it was time for me to stop visiting that place, they needed to grow without me, but the Lord was also protecting me, making sure that my ministry wasn't about me being someone of importance somewhere, rather it was about serving Him in any place or work He saw fit for there is no ego in servanthood.

As we seek these things of the world we also fail to see that we are falling into a trap. We think we are drawing people in to support our world, what we fail to realise is that as we trust the world to supply our needs, we become a prisoner to the world as it is now our supplier, our provider; for as we trust in the world our trust in the Lord is reduced until we don't know how to trust Him any more. At that point the world has trapped us, we don't realise that we have succumbed to its advertising and now our dependency is linked with the world for our needs and provisions and that means that when the world gets rocked, our world is rocked with it.

As believers we need to take a look at ourselves and who we are trusting in for our daily provision, whatever that need may be, physical, emotional, material. Who do we trust in to provide these things? Who do we have faith in to deliver? Do we trust in the Lord alone or do we feel the need to sell ourselves before the world?

When we are looking for income, do we "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6v33), that the Lord may bless us or do we sacrifice these things to foreign gods who we believe can provide for our needs. Do we seek the Lord as to what He wants us to do trusting that if we follow His directions He is able to provide or do we tell the Lord the direction we are going in and tell him that we'll give him a percentage of the profits? Are we doing what we are doing because this is the direction the Lord has led us in or is this just a way of making money? These are interesting questions to ask as it shows who or what we have put our faith in for our daily provision. For if we have learnt to seek the Lord and follow His direction we learn by experience that He is able to provide food, water, clothing and accommodation in any wilderness, it is one of the early lessons Jesus taught his disciples (Luke 10v4). For if the Lord is our provider no matter what happens in this world we can remain calm and stable, however if our trust is in the world we will have to keep manipulating, advertising and compromising ourselves to continue to gain their provision for our future, we sacrifice and see our provision in a foreign god.

Let us take a step back for a moment and look again at the foundations of walking by faith at its most basic level, for to walk by faith means we follow the Lord wherever He leads us. For Him to do that we first have to learn to listen; in the beginning that tends to be seen in the conviction of sin and the step of faith in turning from sin to obedience (Hebrews 6v1). Once we learn to listen to the Holy Spirit as we are convicted of sin we also learn to listen and be led in the ways of righteousness (John 16v8). This is much more than to just stopping sinning; to stop sinning is only a half repentance. True repentance is when we stop doing what we should not be doing and instead do the things we should be doing, the things the Lord is leading us in. Too often we will stop doing something only to replace it with something else.

So let us look at a lesson from the Apostle Paul as a guide to who we are serving and trusting in.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.

Romans 1v1

Jesus took on the nature of a servant (Philippians 2v6-8) and gave his life in daily obedience to the Father's will. We are told in Philippians 2v5 that this should be our attitude and so when we read the beginning of Romans we see that Paul is following the example of Christ and that begins with the servant heart, a willingness to lay our lives down in the service of the Lord; not just in our spare time but all the time. This is shown by Paul's next statement, the "called to be". Notice it does not say that Paul chose to be an apostle; it says that he was called to be an apostle. So as a servant of the Lord Paul has laid down his life in service and has been called to the work of an apostle. So who is he working for? Who is his boss? It's the one he is serving, the Lord. If he is serving the Lord, then who is responsible for his food, clothing, accommodation and income?

Some would say that is the churches responsibility and so Paul would look to the church for his provision. The danger here is that fear can creep in when difficult issues need to be dealt with; should he compromise (sell himself) to keep the churches support?

However, if he sees the Lord as his provider, he can speak boldly, for he knows that the Lord is able to provide for his needs from His eternal resource, all Paul needs to do is walk in the ways of the Lord and seek first the Kingdom (Matthews 6v28-33). Now it is easy to look at Paul as someone in ministry and so someone who should be trusting in the Lord for his provision, but when we take the servant heart attitude we see that this applies to all of us. Applying for a job is no longer about looking for the best pay or conditions, but a seeking after the Lord as to the place that he wants us to serve and minister in. Our concern should not be on the wages, for our provision is from the Lord. When a servant went out to work in the field, if the crop was good or bad, if his master made a fortune or not, was none of his concern; for the fruits of his labour belonged to his master who he in turn trusted to provide for his needs. He didn't go out with the attitude that he would give his master the last ten percent of his labours after making sure he had the cupboards stocked with the fruits of his labour; instead all his work belonged to the master.

It is so easy to build that mound, to make ourselves attractive to the highest bidder, only to find ourselves bound to the ways and provisions of this world. As servants of Christ it is not for us to choose our duties, or even how much we earn; the true servant just asks the master what is his bidding. He does not need to lift himself up on a mound to get himself noticed, for God will lift up his humble servant in due time just as Christ was lifted up (Philippians 2v9).

When we learn to trust in the Lord for our provision we are no longer at the mercy of the world, we no longer have to fear losing our income for the Lord is our income. We no longer need to worry about our reputation before men, for our reputation before the Lord is all that matters and we do not need to worry about losing our ministry, for we minister to the Lord and if we are walking in obedience He will supply all our needs (Philippians 4v19).

As a final thought, we also need to be careful as the body of Christ that we do not sink into the same trap as the individual and compromise to gain the support of the world rather than the support of God. Who is the provider for our churches, our ministries, our missions?

I have always been a great believer that if the Lord has called me to do something, that He is more than able to supply the provisions needed. Sometimes that has led to huge steps of faith, leaving for missions without the means to get back, yet seeing God work miracles of provision in remote places, far from my ability to influence situations. We need to make sure we are doing the same as the body of Christ.

If the Lord is calling us as a church or ministry to do something, to build something, to start a ministry or mission; should we be lifting ourselves up, trying to win the affections of others to gain their material wealth to fund the Lord's work? Or should we be looking to the Lord to provide? Yes the project may be expensive, but if it is what the Lord has called us to, He is more than able to supply the need. Like the persistent widow we need to make sure that it is the Lord we are petitioning, not the world. For as we start to petition the world we declare that our God is not big enough or wealthy enough to provide for His own ministries and needs the world's support. Over the last ten years the advertising, the constant requests for money from different ministries has become endless; where is the faith in the Lord's provision? It is so easy to look to the ways of this world, to look to Councils, lotteries, sponsorships and general collection plate bashing to fund the ministries, to join with other organisations only to find that we have become dependant on them and so we compromise to keep them happy.

In Ezekiel 16v27 we see that as Israel sold itself to the nations around them, the Lord reduced their territory. In other words, instead of them being rulers, they became ruled over. No longer did they live according to their laws, but instead became subject, slaves to the laws of those around them. Sadly we see the same with the church today, our authority, our word is no longer respected and other organisations and groups have taken over our role.

The way to freedom is not found in keeping the world happy, but in keeping the Lord happy. The Lord wants us to be free, to throw off the slavery to this world and find a freedom that is available in Christ alone. Just like the Israelites leaving Egypt it is easy to look back at what we will lose, but instead we need to look forward to the Promised Land that the Lord has set before us if only we are willing to make the journey of obedience that comes from faith (Romans 1v5). Let us never forget that the Lord is leading us on a journey to freedom and blessing (John 8v34-36).

Letter 10: A return to the altar

Ezekiel 16v59-63

As we have skimmed through Ezekiel Chapter 16 over the last few weeks we have seen the charges the Lord laid against His people and sadly we have seen that the same things that Israel did all those years ago, the same heart attitudes, are seen in His people and in the church today. As we look back a few weeks, let us remember that in Letter 4 we looked at the fact that the church has effectively been in exile from the altar of sacrifice, unable to take communion, the symbol of Christ crucified and the new covenant we have received through His blood shed on the cross (1 Corinthians 11v25). No matter what conspiracy theories people may come up with, the fact is that the Lord is in command and He has exiled His people just as He did with Israel in the Old Testament. Even more important is for us to realise that this has never happened worldwide in the history of the church; never before have all Gods people been forced away at the same time. If that has not got our attention then it sadly goes to show just how hardened and prideful our hearts have become and how focused on the physical rather than the spiritual.

As we have looked through Ezekiel 16 we have seen the charges that the Lord brought against His people, their adultery with the world, the false Gods, the raising themselves up. The willingness to make great sacrifice to gain the perceived benefits of these false Gods, even if it meant the sacrifice of their children; and yet through all this, God, as a loving Heavenly Father, was not being cruel. He was trying to get His people to acknowledge how far they had gone astray. To actually have some shame about the sins they had committed (Ezekiel 16v63) and through that shame to be humbled and to understand Gods love and mercy towards them. I wonder when this is all over, will we have learnt our lesson? Will we acknowledge our sin and adultery for what it really is? Or will we still be playing the blame game and focusing on the sins of others, blaming the world around us for our exile? Let us just remind ourselves again, it is our sin that we are in exile for, not the sins of the world; God will judge the world in His own time (2 Peter 3v8-9). So this week we will again ignore the world and start to look at the return journey.

Let us start with one very sobering thought, not everyone returned from exile! As we look at Ezra Chapter 2 and Nehemiah Chapter 7 one of the revelations is that not everyone who went into exile returned. Many had made new homes in their foreign lands and wanted to continue with those lives and businesses, for to be sure, any return to the Promised Land would mean sacrificing the gains they had made in the world and sadly some had come to enjoy the worldly benefits of exile and so did not return. Let us remember millions went into exile, a remnant came back even though the invitation to return was open to all. When our minds are focussed on the things and the comforts of this world it is amazing how easily we settle in with the foreigners and their gods around us. We see this in the life of Lot, for when he separated from Abraham his eyes got drawn to the easy ways, to the plains, to the perceived benefits of good grazing for his flocks and trade with nearby cities (Genesis 13v10). He started off pitching his tent near Sodom (Genesis 13v12) and yet despite

knowing their evil deeds (Genesis 13v13) we find that in no time at all he was living in Sodom (Genesis 19v3-4) and that his daughters had become engaged to these evil men (Genesis 19v14). So let us make up our minds to return to the spiritual Promised Land that God wants his people to dwell in even if it means living in the wilderness as Abraham did for it is in the wilderness that that the Lords provision becomes evident.

As we look at the return to the Promised Land and to Jerusalem in particular we have to remember that the people did not return to a city that was ready for them. The city would have been in ruins, houses, businesses burned and the temple and city walls destroyed. This was literally a starting again, almost a new birth of the nation and yet we see that, when they arrived in Jerusalem, the first thing they did was go to the site of the house of the Lord, now in ruins, and there they made their freewill offerings towards the rebuilding of Gods house (Ezra 2v68-69). Only then did they return to their own homes (Ezra 2v70); in other words, the focus of the return journey was on the House of the Lord rather than their own homes and their first priority was to sacrifice to the Lord, even when their physical homes lay ruined and abandoned.

This theme of sacrifice as a priority is again brought into focus in Ezra 3v1-6, we see that everyone turned up for the rebuilding of the altar so that sacrifices could once again be made in the way that God intended, and following these sacrifices we see a people who once more start to obey the various ordinances that God had spoken to them about, following the feasts as His word commanded them. This is a people who have learnt the lessons of Ezekiel 16v63 and who have returned, humbled before their God. Let us not forget that a man who has been humbled has had his pride removed and has understood his true position before authority, in this case God; no longer does he work towards his own plans, but in humility follows the direction of his master. As the church today, as we look at our exile, have we been humbled? Have we recognised the true state we are in? And as we look to the future what are our plans?

Romans 12v1 tells us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is the sacrifice the Lord requires from His people. This is the sign of humility in our lives that is true worship of God. Just as the Israelites returned first to the altar of sacrifice, so we in turn, in humility, need to walk in the ways of obedience, to live the life of Christ crucified (Galatians 2v20). A life that is led by walking in obedience, sacrificing, crucifying our own desires, walking in obedience to the ways of God, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus (Matthew 16v24-26). It is amazing how even as we read or write these things, the flesh immediately springs up and tries to rationalise this command, trying to water it down in the good old "Did God really Say" and "You won't surely die" (Genesis 3v1&4). Putting the flesh to death will require a bigger sacrifice than we imagine and needs to be a priority if we are going to learn the lessons of our exile.

For when it comes to rebuilding the church, the spiritual not the physical, we need to understand the lessons of Ezra. The altar of sacrifice was built first and then the

temple was built around it through sacrifice. It was not a quick job and came with a lot of opposition, notably from those who wanted to worship God, but who were not part of His people (Ezra 4v1-2). From a logical point of view it would have been a much quicker job to join with these outsiders in rebuilding the temple, more people, more labour, and more resources. Yet this was a people who mixed the worship of God with the ways of the world and if they had been involved it would have meant that the very foundations of the temple would have stood on worship of foreign gods. As we start to rebuild like the people of Israel we need to make sure that we are not building with spiritual foreigners, no matter how nice their words and motives may seem.

We also need to understand that the decision to rebuild in the Lords way caused opposition to arise from the world around them (Ezra 4v4). If the world didn't get its way then it would try to stop the building work going ahead. It would have been so easy to compromise so that the job could be completed quicker, yet thankfully the people stuck to the ways of God. In the end it took many years to rebuild the temple the Lords way, but only rebuilding it the Lords way was it truly the Lords temple.

When the exile is over, as Gods people, we need to take a fresh look at the direction in which we have been going in. Are we going in the ways of the Lord or are we going in the ways of men? Are we building a temple dedicated to the Lord, for His glory? Or are we trying to build something that will attract men? The true church can never be attractive to the world when the altar of sacrifice is in its correct position and the message of Christ crucified is preached. The message of Christ crucified will never be attractive to the world, quite the opposite, it looks like a really stupid unattractive way (1 Corinthians 1v18-25). We however need to make sure that we do not water down that message in any way and that the living of holy and pleasing lives is seen as true worship of God (Romans 12v1). If we are willing to stand firm in faith on that message then we do not need to worry about church growth for Jesus himself said "I will build my church" (Matthew 16v18). We do not need to invest in advertising gimmicks, we need only to concern ourselves with learning to serve and obey (Matthew 28v20). For God is looking for a holy temple, a holy church, that reflects his glory and where Christ is at the centre (Ephesians 2v19-22). That holiness will not come from what we know, but from how we live and serve. It is the act of faith, of believing God and acting on His word even when it goes against the ways of this world.

So often we look short term, but God, Our Heavenly Father is working to His eternal timetable and He has told us what he is working towards. As we look forward to the end of our exile is the Holy City the direction that we want to head in?
Revelation 21v1-4

Letter 11: Rebuilding the walls Part 1

Nehemiah 1v1-11

Last week we looked at the return of the Israelites from captivity and how they started at the altar of sacrifice and then around that altar built the temple of God.

It would be nice to think that that was the end of the story and everyone lived happily ever after in the presence of the Lord, but sadly that is far from the truth; for even as the temple was being built, the influence of the world was having an effect on those living in Jerusalem. The constant daily contact and friendships with the world around them led to a return to the old ways. Instead of being a people separate from the world, they had become one with the world again and had started to inter marry (Ezra 9v1-2). This even affected the leadership of the nation that in turn encouraged those being led to continue in the same way. The situation had become so bad that some of the children did not even speak the Hebrew language (Nehemiah 13v24), instead they spoke the languages of the corrupted nations that surrounded them.

This is a very important picture for us today because it shows the situation we as individual Christians and even the church as a whole has got itself into as we see here a picture of God's people intermingled with the world to the point that their children have no idea of God's ways and the way He speaks, instead they just follow the ways and the rules of the people around them. If asked they would still think of themselves as Israelites and talk of the return from exile, not realising that they had fallen into the trap that the world had set for them.

In ancient times exile was a lot more than a punishment for a people; exile was used as a way of breaking down a nation's cultural identity so that it would be absorbed and become part of the conquering nation. If the exiled people became part of the conquering nation, that nation would benefit from their strength in productivity but also as they became part of the conquering nation they would finish up fighting to defend that nation. We see that exiles often started with the conquering nation taking away the leaders of the conquered nation as we see in 2 Chronicles 36v5-13 with a couple of kings being removed and taken away and a puppet king put in their place, the idea being that they would teach the people to be subject or be removed from their place of leadership. At the same time we see that those sent into exile were taught the ways and languages of their new masters with the idea of them taking a role in their new nation and so showing by example the way to live and settle down (Daniel 1v3-5). At the same time even the remnant in Israel was being diluted among foreign nations as we see new people being moved in to replace those who had gone into exile (2 Kings 17v24).

With the mixing of the nations the individual identity soon fades and the distinctiveness of God's people is lost as it mixes with the ways of the world. Once cultural identity, our doctrine of beliefs, has been lost; the ways and methods of the world become normal and with intermarriage things become even more complicated

because now any decision that is made affects family. We easily compromise because we do not want to cause conflict within the family and so the compromise increases and the distinctiveness of Gods people fades away to the point that we look no different to the world around us. To prevent our distinctiveness, our identity as Christians, from being invaded and compromised we need to set up a barrier, a form of defence to control what comes into our lives and the life of the church; we need a wall! Without that wall we are defenceless to the ways of the world and it is why Nehemiah saw Jerusalem as being in disgrace without those walls (Nehemiah 1v3).

Let us first think about what walls do and do not do, for it is very easy as believers, when we start to talk about walls, to try and misuse them, to misunderstand their purpose.

Walls are a defensive barrier, that might sound obvious, but their purpose is to control what goes in and out of the city for the protection of the city. They allow things to be controlled and checked as they go through the gates and mean that a lot more people can be defended with fewer defenders. Without a wall an attacker can rush in anywhere (Joshua 6v20). With a wall an attacker has to focus on a certain area and so that area can be defended; this is true in the spiritual world as well as in the physical.

Years ago while working in Poland many churches had problems due to teachers coming from different countries and teaching false doctrines; this led to many churches splitting and many other problems. The man in charge of the group of churches I was working with put a simple solution in place, he built a wall! He created a list of approved visiting speakers and within months the situation sorted itself out. He had put up a barrier with a simple check point at the gate that stopped the enemy, false teaching, getting into the city, the church.

Another simple example is the way that many are shielding from Coronavirus. Their needs are delivered to their door so they have control over what comes into their lives. If everyone kept going in and out of the house it would mean constantly trying to decontaminate everything, but if there is a controlled gate, a door, then that is used to restrict what and who comes in and the only defence effort that needs to be put in place is focused around the door area, only what comes in from outside needs to be checked, everything behind the door is safe and can be trusted.

Spiritually these walls can be seen to be made up of our doctrine, our teaching from the word of God, but they are much deeper than that. For it is one thing to know the rules, but another thing to implement them from the heart; to gain a real heart understanding of what can undermine and pollute our lives and the church. The problem with rules on their own is that we learn to push and bend them so that we don't break the letter of the law, rather than understanding what is behind the law. We see in scripture many times that God says to His people that they need to understand the difference between the holy and the unholy or common (Leviticus 10v10, Leviticus 11v47, Ezekiel 44v23), this is an important part of our individual

spiritual growth (Hebrews 5v14) that when taken to heart helps us to become a gate keeper for the church, someone who defends others from the enemies ways. Notice that they are to defend, not to attack! Too many times Christians have tried to use walls to attack others, walls are never used to attack, and they are purely defensive to prevent incoming attacks. Over the years Christians have had a habit of using their walls, the defences the Lord has given them to prevent His people from becoming corrupted, as a weapon of attack on those around. Israel was to keep watch over its own behaviour; it was not to try and force its ways on those outside the walls. That is why we see Nehemiah preventing foreigners from trading in the city on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13v19-22) as a protection for the Israelites, because if the traders came in the Israelites would buy. However we do not read that Nehemiah then sent men to guard the gates of the enemy's cities to stop them from trading on the Sabbath; he was using the gates to defend the city and making sure that anyone who wanted to have interaction inside the city knew the rules they would have to follow; what they did outside the city was their own business. As Christians we need to be careful that we do not get drawn into judging the world, which is not our job (1 Corinthians 5v12-13). Our job is to clean our own city and put the walls in place.

So where do we start? As Nehemiah found out, building walls was not an easy task and it was not a quick job. Everyone had to get involved and most started right outside their own home with the walls slowly joining up to form a barrier around the whole city. For us it needs to be the same so let us start to think about our walls.

When we had the extension put on our house the building inspector turned up a number of times to check certain key points of the construction and the area he checked most was the foundations of the wall. He came to check the depth they had been dug to and the firmness of the soil that was going to be built on and then returned again to check the concrete that had been poured and the first couple of layers of bricks for if these foundational items had been incorrect or sub standard everything that was built on top would fail no matter how good it looked.

It is why churches often fall apart, for the builders have forgotten to make sure that the foundations are strongly built and when it comes to the church the foundation is Christ, the rock (Matthew 16v18). The next section of brickwork again starts from the cornerstone, the point that all the brickwork is tied into and measured from (Ephesians 2v20).

For the believer it is not just a belief in Jesus. Historians believe in Jesus but that does not make them Christians. It is not just believing the bible is true and that Jesus was a good person who did good things. It is not just a set of rules and regulations to be followed because God said so.

True Christianity is built on the foundation of Christ crucified. It is the recognition that in ourselves we have no redeeming features and are unworthy in every way shape and form before God (Romans 3v10, Romans 3v23) and we deserve to be punished eternally for our unrighteous rebellion against God Almighty (Romans

6v23). It is not based on our attitudes to others; it is our rebellion against the Holy and Living God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth (Nehemiah 1v5-7).

It is the recognition that in ourselves we have no hope of paying the penalty for our sins (Isaiah 64v6) and that our only hope for salvation lies through the death of Jesus on the cross (John 14v6) who died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5v8, 1 Peter 3v18), it is not something we deserved but is a gift from a loving Heavenly Father (Romans 6v23, John 3v16). Understanding our sinfulness before God is a crucial foundational layer of the walls that need to be built, for when we understand our sinfulness and depravity before God, then we start to understand the depths of His love and mercy towards us.

Repentance is also another great base layer of the Christian faith, it involves the turning from sin to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Not to earn our salvation but in thankfulness for the mercy God has shown us through Christ (Romans 12v1-2).

If we forget these foundational items or water them down to keep the world happy or improve relationships (unions) with other organisations or religions then we are weakening our defences and allowing the enemy access to the heart of the city. We ignore them at our peril for if we forget, remove or weaken these foundational items, the walls we build above them will be weak and of poor quality, but if we build on Christ and imitate his lifestyle, the walls will be strong and able to endure the battering of an enemy. When it comes to rebuilding the walls the task can seem huge and when we see the wreckage we can become overwhelmed by the amount of rubble (Nehemiah 4v10), the little things that need to be sorted. So let us build wisely starting with the biggest and most important stones and get those firmly in place for again the heaviest and biggest stones need to go at the bottom of the walls to provide the greatest strength and stability (1 Corinthians 3v10-15). Once those are in place we can move forward working our way through the rubble.

As a final thought for the week, let us go back to the subject of intermarriage and our relationships with the outside world, especially when it comes to close friends and family. In the days of Nehemiah they rebuilt the walls and put the gates in place and yet no sooner had Nehemiah gone back to his master we read that the enemies of Israel had been given rooms in the temple (Nehemiah 13v6-9), the holiest of places. Walls are great at keeping things out, but the easiest way past a wall is to get yourself invited in through the door. In the world of computers the easiest way to hack is not to spend hours trying to crack a code, instead it is far easier to impersonate someone who works for the company and ask for the password over the phone. Also let us remember that a door is never part open. It is open or it is closed. A closed and locked door requires a lot of force to get past. A door open even the smallest amount requires little force as the locks no longer function.

Let us be especially careful of compromising the walls and the gospel message to keep friends and family happy (Matthew 12v48-50), for when we compromise the gospel for them we do not bless them, we curse them by giving them a false sense of security and allowing them to think things are alright between them and God. We

need to make sure that these foundation stones are laid correctly and that what we allow in corresponds with the true message of the cross.

Letter 12: Rebuilding the walls Part 2

Last week we started to look at the idea of building walls and their purpose of keeping the enemy out of the city, figuratively our lives and our churches. We saw how Jerusalem was seen to be in great trouble and distress (Nehemiah 1v3) because these boundaries had been removed and as such their enemies could come in and exert influence any time they wanted with no ability to control their access in any way. This week we will continue on this theme to try and get a better understanding of the work that needs to be done.

Nehemiah2v13-17

In the passage above we read that the first thing Nehemiah did on arriving in Jerusalem was to go out and inspect the gates and walls. He had been told before he arrived that the walls had been broken down, but one person's idea of damage is very different to another person's view, so Nehemiah went out and did the inspection himself so that he had a clear idea of what needed to be done, he was not taking other peoples word about the situation.

1 Corinthians 1v18-25

Last week we looked at the need for the foundations of the walls to be strong and built totally on the message of Christ crucified. Not just the message that Jesus died for our sin on the cross, but that in view of God's mercy shown to us at the cross our lives should be lived in love and worship towards God, following in the footsteps of Jesus (Romans 12v1). This means that there will be loss in this world, a sacrifice of self will for the love of God (Luke 9v23-27). A sacrifice that will come about by standing on the Word of God without watering it down to suit the ways of the world.

This week we will think a bit more about the practical application of this because far to often we are trying to build halfway up the wall before we have got this foundation firmly in place; and let us be under no illusion, if we get this foundation wrong the consequences will be eternal, not just to ourselves but to those who receive the false message we preach (Galatians 1v6-10). In this passage in Galatians, Paul makes it very clear about the penalties for straying away from the true gospel message so this week we are going to do some "Nehemiah" wall inspection and start to check our foundations.

I will start with some examples that I hope will help us to see more clearly how easily and deceptively these foundations can be undermined, the first of which is an issue that is really starting to have huge effects around the world, the subject of church unity.

Now at first glance we would all say that church unity is good. Jesus told us clearly to love and care for each other and we see in the early church examples of the churches caring for each other and for other groups of believers (churches), but this

is often when we start to run into trouble; when the "unity" becomes the foundation rather than "Christ crucified". When unity becomes the foundation of the wall it means it is the first test that we apply when checking what is coming in through the gates. At this point we put ourselves in a dangerous situation because unity becomes more important than Christ crucified. As such our joy at the unity means that we do not check the more important message of the gospel with the thoroughness we should and so weaken our defences by including rubble in the wall.

We read in Romans 15v5 about a spirit of unity as we follow after Christ Jesus. In other words the foundation is the message of Christ crucified, if that test is passed it is only then that we move on to unity. So if the message they are preaching alters the message of Christ crucified, no matter how big or strong, helpful or nice we think this other group may be, sadly we need to keep the doors closed.

A similar example that I first came across overseas but that is now far more common in the UK is the idea of the Charismatic Catholic and indeed many other Charismatic groups. Here we see churches uniting around spiritual gifts, signs and wonders, while compromising the basics of the gospel message. We find that in unity, the foundation becomes based on something other than the basis of Christ crucified. If we looked at Christ crucified, it would be obvious that our beliefs are very different, but in our euphoria we skip this foundational check and move much higher up the wall, making something else the focal point. At that moment we may not realise it, but our foundation has been removed from "Christ Crucified" and the repentance that comes from acknowledgement of our sinfulness to focus on the signs and wonders etc. Our gospel has been built on a different foundation, a different Christ and we are warned of the results of this in 1 Corinthians 3v10-15; even more seriously by Jesus himself in Matthew 7v21-23. When we read in Matthew 24v24 we see the elect, God's people being deceived by signs and wonders and false Christ's and prophets. When we start to base salvation on spiritual gifts, they have become the false Christ. For we have changed the gospel from one of repentance and following after Christ through a change of heart and instead have replaced the sign of salvation with someone speaking in tongues or some other spiritual gift. Sadly, as we inspect our walls we may find that our foundation has been damaged a lot more than we first thought and the repair job may be a lot bigger than we at first imagined. As the returning exiles found out, removing the rubble was a huge job, as big and tiring as building the wall itself (Nehemiah 4v10), but if the job is not completed and the site cleared and sorted, the new walls will be built on poor foundations and with poor quality stone and will collapse at the first attack.

Another example of the way the foundations of the walls get compromised is through the danger of the cult of personality. I find it amazing how many Christians will quote a preacher, a book or some podcast or online media, yet when asked what the Lord is saying directly to them they have no idea. The danger here is that it is very easy for the person or organisation, including a church, to take over the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. In John 14v6 we read that Jesus through his death on the cross made a way for us as individual believers to come to the Father. Sadly, if we are not careful, we can replace coming to the father through

Christ to coming to the Father through our favourite author or preacher. So instead of the individual coming to the Father and seeking wisdom and revelation through the Holy Spirit (John 16v12-14, Colossians 1v9) as we see in the daily life of Jesus; this in turn means that the message we receive is second hand at best, but also makes us dependant on someone or something other than the Lord. When they become our foundation, any movement in their lives has an instant impact on our own lives and if they start to drift we easily follow as our anchor is not in the Lord but in another person or group. Not only that, but in our dependence on the organisation or person, we easily blind ourselves to any failings in our desire to stay aligned with them and so we will allow parts of the wall to be demolished and bad teaching allowed to come in so that we can keep what we view as the good bits. In 1 Corinthians 1v11-13 we see that in the early church this cult of personality easily formed, even if Paul, Apollos and Peter did not want it. What we are seeing here is believers looking for a route to hearing from God that takes a short cut and avoids waiting on the Lord as an individual. This was a major downfall of the Israelites in Exodus 20v19. here we see how the Israelites wanted Moses to be their communication between them and God, sadly this meant that the laws that Moses gave them became a set of rules from a man rather than revelation from God because the individual relationships was degraded. We read how that generation fell away from God, dying in the wilderness through their constant rebellion because they knew the laws but didn't know God in the way they should have. It is interesting to note that Joshua who took over from Moses became a leader because while everyone else was enquiring through Moses, he remained constantly in the tent of meeting, enquiring of God for himself (Exodus 33v7-11).

The other sad part of the dangers of personality is that we compromise the walls because we like someone, we get on with them and we see them as a good person or having a good heart. They have helped us out in the past so we owe a debt of gratitude; maybe they are related or have held a position of importance in our lives. At this point we will easily overlook the compromise in the message of Christ crucified in preference for what we perceive as the other important attributes in their lives that affect our interaction and favouritism towards them. At this point we have totally undermined the walls and have placed our views and feelings as the foundation of the walls rather than the message of Christ crucified. Without realising it our walls are built on rubble.

Let us be very clear in our understanding of false prophets and teachers, they will not appear as mean and nasty people. We are drawn in by our attraction for them and their teaching, as it says in 2 Timothy 4v3-4. It will be the individual believer who seeks after those saying the things they want to hear and doing the things they want to do. Sadly this is because it shows that our own lives are not built on the foundation of Christ crucified and this in itself may come as the biggest shock yet. For in our building of the walls we have looked at others as the source of false teaching, yet we do not like to consider ourselves as having gone astray; our pride will not allow it. Is the gospel we preach in words and deeds about Christ crucified and the Lordship of Christ in our lives, or do we preach the modern message of Jesus dying on the cross for me so that when we accept him he will be our servant for the

rest of our days? Is the core of our Christian life the gospel message of an obedience that comes through repentance in thankfulness for the salvation we have received through Christ or have we lost our focus and drifted off to argue and discuss other matters (2 Timothy 2v23, Titus 3v9), not realising how far we have been blown off course.

At this point, our putting up of the walls and restricting the access of those who are not seen to be part of us can be seen as unloving and cruel. However, we need to remember that these walls, if received with the right attitude of heart, can be a real blessing to those who are going astray. Two boats on the ocean may seem to be only metres apart and not moving, and indeed their distance from each other may never change. However, it is only when they drift together past an Island that is fixed that they understand the distance they have travelled. In the same way the walls can help to bring people's focus back on to the true gospel message. Being forced to spend a night outside the walls (Nehemiah 13v19-22, 1 Corinthians 5v9-11) may be just what is needed to help those going astray to realise they have become foreigners to God's people. For real love includes discipline, not as a way of getting revenge, but as an act of love to guide the lost back onto the right path. The book of 1 Corinthians probably contains the recommendation for some of the most harsh treatment of one believer to another in the whole of the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5v1-5), so harsh that Paul himself found it hard to write at a personal level (2 Corinthians 7v8), but that harsh discipline, the wall that was put up not only caused those in the church to re evaluate their lives (2 Corinthians 7v9-12) but it also led to repentance from the one who had been leading them astray (2 Corinthians 2v5-7). What at first looks to be harsh was actually saving souls and leading the church back to the life of Christ crucified.

Walls based on Christ crucified not only protect us from the influence of false prophets and preachers and even ourselves, but they also protect us in our relationships with other worldly organisations. For without constantly checking the foundation of the relationship we can easily become what the Bible calls unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6v14-18). Usually when this passage is quoted it is used in the context of marriage and wisely so, for again when looking at marriage, if the husband and wife have different foundations and goals they will not be able to walk together. For when two animals were yoked together it enabled the farmer to plough or pull larger loads using two animals going in the same direction. However, if those animals went their own way, one pulling against the other, the weaker one would be drawn after the stronger, but the stronger would still find itself slowed down by the resistance of the other animal, they would be walking a path of conflict and compromise. The farmer would have been better off just using one animal than spending all day trying to control two opposing animals (Deuteronomy 22v10). For the church and us as believers we need to be careful in becoming unequally yoked with the world and this is easily done when we forget the foundation of Christ crucified.

As a simple example of how easy it is to get trapped in this area, as a young church we used to rent a room at our local university. Like so many things the room rental

came with a list of terms and conditions and it would have been quite easy to quickly race through them with no real thought to what they said. However, as we read through we found a section that related to not being able to refuse entry to any meeting based on someone's race, gender, sexuality, marital status etc. Now Jesus makes no distinctions in this area when calling people to come to him. He died for the unrighteous and as a church we are to share the gospel with all mankind, however before signing the rental agreement we needed to check if this had any restrictions on what we would be allowed to preach. For Jesus calls sinners to be saved, but that salvation means turning from our old ways to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and that means that things that may be acceptable in the world and even encouraged must be opposed in the church. Thankfully we could preach what we wanted, but it was easy to see how we could have so easily have had our walls compromised by entering into an agreement that unequally yoked us and pulled us in a direction that was not of God.

Many times Christians and churches fall into the trap of becoming yoked with unbelievers linking up with organisations that we see as sharing our goals so let's look at a simple but common example of how this starts to go astray.

Let's think of a situation where someone wants to reach out to the poor in their area, a good and worthy cause that we would view as Biblical. Our first step needs to be to seek the Lord on this, for our motives can easily be based on emotion or personal experience, when our motives need to be based on the gospel. Let us remember the harsh reality that a man who starves to death knowing Christ is better off than the man who lives longer with a full stomach but never knows Christ as his Lord and Saviour. So when we set out we need to know very clearly from the Lord what the goal of the work is, for it is very easy to see the physical feeding as being of most importance. At this point the walls are easily breached because as we start to feed the poor, we find more poor who need feeding. Suddenly we can't cope with the demand and before we know it we start to look to other groups, companies, organisations that can help us in our goal that is no longer based on Christ crucified but is based on providing provision. As we partner with these other organisations we become linked (yoked) with them and become associated with their goals and ideals that will very often be in conflict with the message of Christ crucified. Before we know it we start to allow unbelievers into the ministry and so we are now preaching a mixed message of our beliefs and lifestyles alongside our yoke workers and their lifestyles and beliefs. We may end up physically feeding more people, while totally compromising the gospel message. Even worse we need to understand that when we partner with these groups, when they go astray, we will be linked with them and so the name of Jesus is degraded. We need to be very careful how we link up not only with companies or other charities, but also with causes and political organisations for when we yoke ourselves with them we may find that there is a lot more to the partnership than we first thought. There is a saying "Never look a gift horse in the mouth", in other words if someone is giving you something for free just take it without any questions. We need to be praying, especially about the "free gifts". The Israelites in Joshua 9 finished up being deceived by the Gibeonites. They said all the right things and displayed all the right motives (Joshua 9v9-11) and we

see that the Israelites let their guard down. They looked at the physical evidence, they read the contract and assumed they understood the treaty, but they never sought the Lord (Joshua 9v14). Over a million Israelites, priests, leaders, heads of families, all unequally yoked because they didn't seek the Lord. A simple example of how easy it is to invade a people when the walls are not in place.

Let us take this time to seek the Lord, to do an examination of the walls and see for ourselves the state we are in. If we will allow the Lord to guide us we may be in for some serious shocks, but if we are willing to clear out the rubble and build the walls once again on the correct foundations, we have an opportunity to become a distinct and separate people that are a true light in the darkness and who truly lift up the name of Jesus in both word and deed.

Letter 13: Rebuilding the walls Part 3

Exodus 13v1-16

This week we will continue look at some of the issues around rebuilding of the spiritual walls of our lives and in turn the church, but before we look at some of the problems that can arise, we need to take a close look at ourselves as although problems always arise when walls are built up, some of these problems can be averted by us having the right heart attitude. Sadly walls have been built in many churches and many Christian's lives have missed the foundation of Christ crucified altogether and instead of bringing blessing, have brought division and opposition. So once again, we need to keep a careful eye on our foundations.

In the passage above we need to remember that Israel at this point is coming out of the world and moving towards the Promised Land, a land that they have not earned in any way shape or form, but one that the Lord God Almighty was taking them to so that they would be a holy nation under God; a living example to the nations around of the way that they should live before God. In this passage there are a couple of verses to highlight in Exodus 13v8-9. These verses highlight to us an important principle we need to have in place for any spiritual walls that we are going to build, the motivation behind building them.

Far too often believers have built walls that on paper may seem good, but the motivation behind them is all wrong. If we are not careful we can become a kind of "Holy Club", becoming those who see themselves as spiritually superior to those around them and acting like a kind of spiritual police force who impose the law on those around them to make sure everyone obeys the rules because we like everything to look neat and tidy. At this point we have failed to stand on the foundation of "Christ Crucified" because, instead of walking in humility, we are walking in pride and superiority. Jesus when dealing with sinners, never approved of their sin, his message was always a message of repentance to turn from their sin (Matthew 4v17, John 8v11), but that message came from a heart of love, rather than a spirit of condemnation and it is this heart attitude we see highlighted in Exodus 13v8, "I do this because of what the Lord did for me." The motivation behind building the walls must come out of reverence for God rather than an attempt to make ourselves look special before men, but also as is shown in Exodus 13v9, these walls are a sign and a reminder to keep the word of the Lord on our lips, that as Jesus pointed out is the overflow of our hearts (Matthew 12v34). So in all our building we need to keep in mind that we are only sinners saved by grace as the great apostle Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 15v9-10. As such, our purpose in building the walls is to bring glory to God alone, not to ourselves or to the church. God glorifies those who humble themselves before Him, not those who glorify themselves before the world. As the church in Ephesus found out, it is possible to have everything legalistically correct, yet have lost the foundation of repentance that comes through a loving relationship with God (Revelation 2v1-7); doing the right thing, from the wrong heart. We need to be especially careful in this area when we

have been saved for a long time; it is very easy for the momentum of what we know to take over from our daily relationship with the Lord and as we grow in knowledge of the Word of God we need to be careful that our intellectual knowledge does not become a pride that deceives us into thinking that we are more than we really are; we need to keep a sober judgement about ourselves (Romans 12v3). The same applies when we are part of Christian families that have a long spiritual heritage, especially in ministry. It is so easy at this point to see ourselves as something special, raising ourselves up and forcing the rules on others from a position of superiority; Romans 3v23 needs to be a constant reminder to us that all have sinned, all have rebelled and we have nothing to boast about (Romans 3v27). Let us remember the walls are about our lives and are to be built as we are led of the Lord to bring glory and honour to Him and the Name of Jesus; not built as we see fit and for our own purposes. Everything that God asks His people to build is always according to the pattern and the ways of heaven (Exodus 25v9 & 40, Acts 7v44), not the pattern and the ways of men and this world (Romans 12v2). We need to keep a constant eye on our motives for we build as servants of the Lord, as the Lord has called us to be, not as we choose to be (Romans 1v1) and our pursuit of holiness is not to show off to the world, but is in view of Gods mercy (Romans 12v1) and His calling on our lives (1 Peter 1v15-16).

These attitudes become especially important when we start to face opposition from the world and even other believers as without the correct heart foundation and motivation, our response is no longer from the heart of Christ, but from the heart of man. We see in the life of Jesus that when he deals with us he understands the battles and struggles we are going through because he has been there (Hebrews 4v15). We need to be careful as we build, for often opposition will come from those who will feel convicted or rejected because of their exclusion due to the walls. As we deal with this type of situation we, even more than Christ, should understand and sympathise as we have all sinned and fallen short. However, that does not mean we compromise the walls or reduce their height. This attitude is something that we need to persevere in, often over very long periods of time. How often have we seen children, and sadly adults too, get their way because they kept putting pressure on the walls until those inside grew tired of defending and surrendered? Again, at times like this, we need to make sure we understand whose walls we are defending and why. We are to defend the walls that the Lord has called us to build because that is the calling of the Lord; we do not need to justify ourselves before man, for it is the Lord Himself who justifies us, He is our Lord and Master. This is especially important when the pressure comes from family or close friends for those are the ones we are most likely to compromise for.

Often, as in Nehemiah 4v17-18, we also need to recognise that the enemy will strike as soon as we start to build the wall; he does not wait for it to be finished. As such we need to be fully armed and alert at all times, even as we build (Ephesians 6v10-18), making sure that we are strong in the Lord. This is not about us arming ourselves with the Lords armour; rather it is about making sure we are in the centre of His will so that He is surrounding us with His protection, for as always, our strength is in the Lord alone.

We need to remember that very important fact as building and defending the walls can be a very lonely task. We may be working hard on a section as the Lord has led, but at times we can feel like we are distant from any other worker and alone when attack comes. There are times when attacks come that we need to be able to put out the trumpet call to others (Nehemiah 4v19-20), not to help defend us, but to help us defend the wall. It is so easy when the attack comes to take it personally rather than understanding the attack is against the walls; as we understand this, it helps us in our prayer life as we start to see the purposes of our prayer and move from it being self seeking to Kingdom defending. This can happen very easily as we watch the walls. For we need to understand that for a watchman on a wall, the night time is the most difficult time to maintain a state of alertness. Watch keeping can be very lonely, and it is a loneliness that is compounded by being surrounded by the darkness. At times like that it can be very easy to become insular and see ourselves as being alone in our work, not realising that the Lord has put others in place, and we cannot see them due to the distance and the darkness around us.

One last thought about being a watchman, as someone who spent two years watch keeping on a ship. The golden rule was never sit down; keep walking, keep moving, especially in the darkest hours when it is so easy to fall asleep. It is the same in our spiritual life, it is so easy to sit down and take a break, only to find that before we know it we have fallen asleep and the enemy has entered the city. For me, as a ships watch keeper, there were always jobs to be done and endless checks to be made. Similar in those dark hours when we feel alone, it is so easy to stop looking outwards and start looking at our own needs and wants and once again, before we know it, the enemy has struck. For us as believers, as we build the walls and keep watch over them we also need to constantly be checking and working away as the Lord leads, building and defending to the glory of God and remembering clearly what we are doing and why.

Proverbs 6v9-11

Letter 14: Living within the walls

Nehemiah 6v15-16

When Nehemiah made his initial survey of the city walls (Nehemiah 2v17-18) the task to rebuild must have seemed huge. The destruction, the rubble that lay in the way, the ruined materials and the need to build new gates would in themselves all seem massive tasks at any time, but add to this that the people were few in number and had families to support and at the same time needed to build and stand watch while enemies looked on; the job could be seen as almost impossible, a job that would take years to complete; yet fifty two days later the walls had been finished and their enemies instantly lost their self confidence.

These two verses are important verses for us to keep in mind as over the last few weeks we have looked at ourselves and the church with sober judgement (Romans 12v3); the task that needs to be undertaken can seem impossible and our little bit of building may look as if it will hardly make an impact; yet we see that with the Lords help and strength, in under two months, the city walls had been rebuilt and the same is true of our spiritual walls today. It is at times like this that we need to understand that starting a work that seems impossible is what real faith is all about, undertaking a job that in our own strength seems impossible, yet trusting that the Lord will lead, guide and fulfil His plans for us (Philippians 4v13); for our God is a God of the impossible.

This week we will start by looking at the builders themselves to see what we can learn and the first lesson is the walls were rebuilt by a whole variety of people, from the small to the great. Priests and rulers, craftsmen and traders all worked alongside each other with the goal of completing the task in hand. One thing we notice though is that the men led the work, we read in Nehemiah 3v12 that the daughters of Shallum helped in the work, and I am sure other women helped elsewhere, but what is important to understand here is that the men led their families by example. This is an important spiritual principle for any leader and highlights the difference between management and leadership. A manager tells people what to do, a leader shows people by example, by going first. This was the way Jesus taught his disciples and we see the same principle when Paul writes to Timothy to tell him what to look for in leaders for the church (1 Timothy 3v1-10). He was to look for those who led their families by example as this is the real fruit of the spirit that the Lord wants to see in all our lives (Galatians 5v22-24). This means that the men of the church need to step up to the job and get to work and lead by example. In this day and age I hear complaints about churches putting women in positions of leadership in conflict with the guidance of Paul as we saw earlier in 1 Timothy 3v1-10. However, the real issue is not "Why are the women leading?" The real issue is "Why are men not leading?" Why are the so called "Men of God" not willing to take their place of leadership? It is easy to complain about things while sitting and watching, the Kingdom of God is not a spectator sport, it is an active living walk with God, a calling on our servant hearts

(Romans 1v1) and one in which the men of God need to stand up and lead the way, not in talk but in action.

These same issues occurred during the rebuilding of the walls. Some men saw themselves as being above doing manual work (Nehemiah 3v5), and even worse, some of these men, instead of helping the situation, actually made the work harder for those doing the rebuilding, putting an extra burden on the workers (Nehemiah 5v6-8) to the extent that they even finished up making slaves out of the workers; wanting the protection of the wall, while to their shame, exploiting the workers building them. For them, business, making money and building their own little kingdom was far more important to them than the work being done, exactly the opposite to the ways of God (Matthew 6v33). As the walls are rebuilt, men of God need to be willing to stand up and lead by example, individually knowing what the Lord has called them to and not waiting for others to go first. This hypocrisy has to stop if the Kingdom of God is going to move forward; everyone starting with the leaders and family heads needs to show by example the seriousness of the work at hand, but also the need for each one of us to live within the walls and the restrictions those walls may bring. It is so easy to want to see everything done in the right way, providing it does not impact our own lives. As we see in Nehemiah, once the walls had been built, a call was put out for people to leave their homes and move in behind the walls (Nehemiah 11v1-36). For the church to move forward, for the walls to be defended, needs a lot more than just the pastors and elders to live within the walls. It needs the whole church to take up its position of being a holy nation before God (1 Peter 2v9-12), for revival has always come from a foundation of prayer and repentance that leads to holiness; not a holiness that leads to a separation from the world, but a holiness that stands out in the world and shows love to the world around while being able to return to the safety of the walls that surround and protect the temple and the altar of sacrifice.

Ten weeks ago we looked at the idea of the church being in exile and how exile was a period that God used to bring the Israelites to an understanding of just how far they had fallen. The promises God made to the Israelites in exile is as true today as it was in the days of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29v10-14). They would endure exile, but through that exile they would come to know the blessings of God when they once again sought Him with all their heart. As churches in the UK and indeed all over the world, we will have had over one hundred days of exile. Over one hundred days to think and ponder on the things of God. Over one hundred days to have sought Him and asked Him what needs to change in our lives and in the life of the church. In many ways we have been given a huge task, removing rubble and rebuilding on the message of Christ crucified. The difficult question we need to ask is; Have we been changed in the last one hundred days? Are we looking forward to a new start or are we just anxious to get back to the way things used to be, to go back to the comfort of the old routine?

Nehemiah 9v1-38 is the confession of the Israelites of their sin, their constant walking away from the ways of the Lord and the understanding that the Lord in His discipline has been just and merciful towards them. It is as if at this point they have

understood the ways of God and regained a holy fear of the Lord. Nehemiah 10v28-39 is their response, their repentance. Not a set of words, but a set of actions to be undertaken to ensure that Gods laws would be fulfilled within the walls and that the verses we started with in Nehemiah 6v15-16 would continue to be fulfilled in their lives and the generations to come bringing glory to God; it looks like everything is going to finish with a glorious happy ending, if only that was true.

After some time Nehemiah had to return to Babylon for a short period and in that short period we find that foreigners once again had been given rooms in the temple (Nehemiah 13v6-9) and that people had once again let business take over from the things of God (Nehemiah 13v15-22) and finally the people quickly intermarried with the nations around them creating a nation that no longer knew it's own language (Nehemiah 13v23-31). It was a pattern that continued for the years to come and that Jesus saw when he entered the temple and found that it had become a marketplace (Mark 11v15-17); yet let us remember that the Israelites thought everything was alright. Even more alarming is that the spiritual leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, were the ones that opposed the ways of Jesus more than anyone else and led the call for him to be crucified (Luke 22v1-6 & 23v1-2).

Let that last thought sink in for a moment. Those who regarded themselves as the spiritual elite, the guardians of the laws of God, led the call for the rejection, removal and crucifixion of Christ, the Son of God, rejecting his teaching and his ways, and even accusing him of being of the Devil (Matthew 12v22-32). Meanwhile, those who recognised themselves as sinners found salvation through Christ then and to this day, as they humbled themselves and repented of their sinful ways.

The Bible warns us that in the end times there will be a great falling away (Matthew 24v10), it is so easy to think of that falling away as meaning that churches will be empty, however Jesus is not talking about falling away from church, He is talking about falling away from faith in Him. Faith in walking in His footsteps, faith in walking in the ways of Christ crucified; falling away from the message of Christ crucified is easily done while still attending a church. He reinforces this message in Matthew 11v6 after the death of John the Baptist, warning those around that following the path of Christ crucified is difficult in this world and will face opposition and persecution even unto death. As we have seen before in Matthew 7v15-23, we are warned that if we stray from the true message of Christ crucified that brings about the true fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5v22-25), we may be active in our church, yet be far away from the Lord himself.

For us, as individuals, are we willing to work hard to build on the foundation of Christ crucified or do we want to find teachers who will tell us what our itching ears want to hear (2 Timothy 4v3-4)? For you can be sure that in the end times, those false prophets will not be preaching to empty churches, it is why Timothy was to stay calm and continue to preach the true message of Christ crucified (2 Timothy 4v2). False prophets have always given the people what they want to hear while God Almighty gives us the truth in Christ. These are all things that we need to spend these last days of exile thinking and praying about so that once again we are clear on the direction in which the Lord wants us to go.

So as we come out of our exile, rather than having our heads held high, let us walk in true humility and repentance and obedience before our God (Micah 6v8), that we may bring glory to the name of Jesus for all He has done for us through the cross.

1 Peter 1v13-16