



PARTY ON THE WALL

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
November 15, 2009*

Anybody know what this is? It might look like just an ugly hunk of concrete, but it was the cause of what was called the biggest party in Europe this past Monday.

I'm talking, of course, about the Berlin Wall. Lisa Johnston happened to have lived very near the Berlin Wall back right before it fell, and her friends sent her this piece of it shortly after it was torn down.

Monday marked the 20 year anniversary of its fall, and Germany was doing some serious celebrating. They brought in all kinds of world leaders – Mikhael Gorbachev, Lech Walesa, BonJovi...And they had 1000 giant dominoes painted like the wall that they knocked over in a chain to represent the toppling of communism.

I remember, as I'm sure many of you do, the images on the news of when the wall fell in 1989. All those people climbing up and being pulled up to stand on top of it. The crowd packed as many people up there as they could to celebrate and dance and sing and feel the victory. It was one of those contagiously happy moments that the whole world was cheering for, because the wall had represented so much more than just a city barricade. And twenty years later it is still a powerful symbol.

That visual of the crowd on top of a wall is what I picture as I think of our story today. Because it's about another big party that happened on top of a wall. But this party wasn't because the wall was torn down – it was because the wall was built up. If you're just joining us this Sunday, we've been studying the book of Nehemiah and the great project to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that had been destroyed. The work got finished in record time, and so they throw a party. Nehemiah starts pulling people up on top of the wall. Everybody crowded up there to celebrate. It was truly one of the happiest crowd moments recorded for us in the Bible.

Nehemiah 12:27-43

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. The singers also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem—from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the

singers had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate. Hoshai and half the leaders of Judah followed them, along with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, as well as some priests with trumpets, and also Zechariah son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, and his associates -- Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani -- with musical instruments [prescribed by] David the man of God. Ezra the scribe led the procession. At the Fountain Gate they continued directly up the steps of the City of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.

The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people--past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall, over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped.

The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials, as well as the priests -- Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elieoenai, Zechariah and Hananiah with their trumpets -- and also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malkijah, Elam and Ezer. The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

We didn't plan it this way, but I think it's perfect that we started off this morning with a child dedication. What better way to set the stage for thinking about what it means for something or someone to be dedicated to God.

We're going to spend the majority of our time this morning talking about the whole concept of dedication. But I want to begin by making a couple observations about the wall itself.

We've been talking about this wall for weeks now. It had so much history that mirrored what had happened to the residents of Jerusalem. The piles of rocks told the story of a broken down people. The charred gates were reminders of lives that had been burned and devastated. There were memories of failure and pain. The wall had become nothing more than a series of weak spots where blood had been spilt and lives lost. It had been a source of shame and disgrace.

Now, though, it had become something much different. It was the miracle wall. It was an impossible dream that had come true, a monument to God's faithfulness as well as the hard work of the people. Their best skills and energies had gone into this project, and now the wall stood for security and comfort and well being.

In other words, this stack of boulders and mud and bricks and timbers had become a symbol of redemption. It was the wall of a city that had been shattered and worthless but was now restored to a place of meaningfulness and great worth. And redemption was what had happened for the Israelites as well – they had been slaves and exiles, with their identity all but erased. And now they were rebuilt as the people of God once more.

The second thing that struck me about this wall is that it was an unusual choice of something to dedicate to God, because it wasn't a particularly spiritual piece of architecture. When they dedicated the Temple, that's expected. When they dedicated the altar, you can see why that would be devoted to God. But this is a city project. It's not going to be a place where church services or held or where people go to pray. It's just very much a part of ordinary life. It has a dung gate, for crying out loud!

But the wall does wrap all the way around the entire city. It sums it up. It defines what is Jerusalem and what isn't. So to dedicate the wall is in essence dedicating everything inside it to God.

Like we've been saying all along, the wall isn't just a wall. And as we look to bring this story into our own lives, it is these two truths about the wall that transfer over. Number one: Redemption. We all know what it is like to be devastated. We have felt the shame of failure and the effects of being broken down and burned. And as we come to Christ, we begin to see a new story emerging. It's a story of hope and rebuilding and once again having worth and identity and security.

And as the redeemed people of God, it is fitting for us to then dedicate ourselves to him.

Number two: It's all of life. There is no portion that is too "unspiritual" to dedicate to him. Just like that wall went clear around the city, we are to bring everything that makes us us to God.

Do you want to be devoted to God? Do you want to be dedicated to his work? I do. At least I say I do. It's easy to throw that word around without necessarily grasping what we're committing ourselves to.

Two examples from how the word is used in everyday life can help round out our thinking. Given that it was just Veteran's Day this past week, there were quite a few places that had dedications ceremonies. There were parks, monuments and buildings dedicated to the memory of soldiers who have served this country or given their lives for it.

When the word is used in that sense, dedication is about remembering. It places a permanent marker on the landscape so that we will not forget the sacrifices people have made and what has been done for us. And in a real sense, dedicating ourselves to God has the same quality to it. It is finding a way to remember all that God has done for us. It

transforms our lives into a permanent marker on the landscape so that we and the people around us don't forget the sacrifice Jesus has made for us.

A second way you hear the word being used comes from the realm of technology. Companies often have what they call a "dedicated server." By that, they mean a computer host devoted solely to their one web site's needs. They don't share it with anybody else. It is exclusive and singular in its purpose.

That's helpful, because dedicating ourselves to God is more than a memorial for what he has done in the past – it's a statement about how we plan to live from this point forward. We are setting ourselves aside exclusively for God. We become God's dedicated servers -- exclusively available to him for his purposes.

As the Israelites chose to dedicate their wall, they took the whole thing very seriously. Nehemiah tells us the Levites – the worship leaders -- were sought out where they lived. They tracked down singers and instrumentalists from all over the region. They took great care in making all the arrangements for this ceremony.

Obviously we can't go about things in quite the same way as them. We won't be hiring a band and choir every time we want to commit ourselves to God. But dedicating ourselves to God is not something we should take lightly. We can come at it with the same intentional, thoughtful approach. And there are patterns in what they did that can become our template.

One of the most essential steps in dedicating ourselves to God is **Releasing control, inch by inch**

Just a couple of years ago, archaeologist in Jerusalem uncovered a section of what they believe is Nehemiah's wall. Fragments of pottery have helped them date it to that time. It was no skinny backyard fence – the wall appears to have been about 15 feet thick and even taller than that. It was massive. That makes the text a little more understandable when it talks about large groups of people marching around on top of it.

It also helps you appreciate just how enormous of a project this really was. The people had accomplished something extraordinary. So I can imagine there was a great deal of pride and a certain sense of ownership. I know if I had built part of it, every time I had out of town visitors over, I would walk them past that corner and say, "See these rocks? I put them here. Every single one. With my bare hands. In the dead of winter. With two broken arms. In record time."

Such a historic achievement could have become the badge the city held up as their identity. And given the nature of the wall, it would have been easy for them to place a lot of trust in the strength of what they had done for themselves.

And yet the people realized it wasn't their wall – it belonged to God. It was his city, the place he had marked out for his temple. He was the one who had brought Nehemiah to town. He was the one who paved the way and gave them strength to do the job. Releasing control is not so much about doing God a favor by giving him something – it's recognizing that it was all his to begin with and rightly belongs to him.

Imagine you're five years old, and you're helping your dad build your new bike. You're so excited about it. But like most five year olds, you don't really know how to put a bike together, so you're pretending you're helping. So you pick up a wrench and you start pounding on the frame like you're tapping it into place. Then a few minutes later, your dad says, "Okay. I need that wrench now." And you're torn. You have been having a lot of fun using it the wrong way. You don't want to stop, because you're helping. But if the wrench is used the right way, you will end up with the bike you've really been hoping for.

Sometimes I have in my head that it is a big sacrifice for me to be willing to give up my agenda for my life and hand the reins over to God. What I forget is that I was designed to fit his purposes. I'm over here pounding away with the wrench that is my life, unsure about letting go. Giving it up to him isn't going to spoil my fun – it's going to open up an entire new understanding of who I am meant to be.

The Israelites were turning over the wall to God. They were acknowledging that he was in charge. It had been his project from the beginning. It was his wall and his city to do with as he saw fit.

This dedication service of theirs was unusual. Instead of it happening in one location, it travelled as it went along. In fact, it travelled in two opposite directions. One group went left, the other went right. As they walked across each section of the wall. It was as if with each step they were saying, "This part is dedicated to God, this gate is his, this section is his, this tower is his..." By physically moving across each different section, the Israelites were confronted over and over again with how much of the wall they were giving to God.

When we think of dedicating our lives to God, we may think of a moment in time where we make that decision. But it is so much more than that. It means going step by step through every day and claiming ground as we go. And each corner of our life that we come to, we face the decision of whether or not we are going to give control over that portion of our lives to God. We need to walk through the whole spectrum of our actions and thoughts, our fears and feelings and say, "This part of me is going to be dedicated to God, this part of me is going to be dedicated to God, this part of me is going to be dedicated to God..."

Many of us will never move to dedication because when we lean that way, our past failures and shame mock us saying, "Who do you think you are? You're just setting yourself up for failure again." And that's where Satan, our accuser would like to keep us

– thinking that it’s about performance and our own ability. But God comes in great power when we ask God to replace us as the overseer of our souls.

Dedication is about releasing control, inch by inch. It’s also about **Removing crud, inside and out.** Before the marching got started, Nehemiah tells us this:

When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

It is estimated that 1.1 billion people around the world lack access to clean drinking water. Countless people die around the world because there is bad stuff in their water: bacteria, parasites, heavy metals or toxic chemicals. What the world desperately needs are better purification systems, better filters to remove the harmful contaminants that don’t belong in the water.

That’s all purification is – removing the harmful stuff that doesn’t belong.

If you ever happen to research the purification rites of the Old Testament, you’ll find there are three elements that seem to show up fairly regularly. First is sacrifices. That’s the core of the remedy. An animal had to be offered up on the altar. That was the way of dealing with the penalty for sin. There was a costly and graphic reminder that purification came at someone else’s expense.

Secondly, the people were given a personal responsibility to modify their behavior. If there was known sin, it needed to be stopped. And sometimes they were asked to symbolize the change by putting on clean clothes, or shaving their heads, or showing themselves to a priest. They were to get rid of impurity in all its forms.

The third element was time. When someone was considered unclean, often they had to go through a period called the “days of purification.” It could be a week or a month -- they just had to wait it out. There weren’t any shortcuts.

It’s easy to see these same elements at work in our own purification. We can’t hope to be pure without the sacrifice of Jesus. His death is what paid the penalty and removes our impurity as far as God is concerned. And that’s the most important piece to realize. That’s the core. We can’t dedicate ourselves to God until we have said yes to Jesus. Yes I need your death for me. I need your forgiveness.

We need him to take the guilt and punishment away for us. But as Paul points out, we don’t ask him to do and then keep going the way we were.

Romans 6:1-2

So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there?

This is where that second aspect of purification comes in – the personal responsibility. If we've asked for Christ's purity to apply to us, then it should be evident in our lifestyle as well.

Maybe this sounds really obvious, but we can't say we're devoted to God without also looking at purity in our lives. I was just talking with someone last week who realized there was a sin in their lives they had been avoiding, and they finally took the steps to cut it out. I asked them if it was hard and they said no – it was actually a relief. Because they knew it was out of line with a life dedicated to God. But it was such a rare and refreshing admission. It takes a tremendous amount of courage as a Christian to acknowledge that something is going on in your life that isn't right and take responsibility to do something about it. We have this backward idea that good Christians don't have to do those things, so we hide or ignore our own sin rather than dealing with it.

But that's not purity, and God won't bless sin. I love it that Nehemiah says the Levites didn't just purify the people – they also purified the gates and the walls. Gates and walls can't sin. But they are a place of access. And they are the boundary lines that are drawn.

Think about the gates and boundaries in your own life – the places where you allow influences to come in. It might be your friendships. It might be your entertainment. Maybe your work environment. What about that gate needs purification? What is harmful that needs to be removed? I know one couple that took a hard look around at everything in their home with just that question in mind. What are we letting in? And is it helpful or harmful?

That third aspect of purification is time, and this can be a hard one. We want to be free instantly of our struggles. We want victory over our temptations and addictions. But some of them hang around a long time. The road to holiness is one that takes time and patience. We can get discouraged with that and feel like quitting. But God tends to use the slowness of our progress as a way to remind us of our dependence on him.

Rick Bass is an environmentalist who spends a lot of time trying to find common ground with loggers and miners in Montana. It is difficult work, and he has applied what he knows about glaciers to his own life. Glaciers are the most powerful, unstoppable force on earth. They are also one of the slowest things to form.

He says that one theory about how glaciers are formed is that they are, “the result of a wobble in the earth's rotation...glaciers get built or not built, simply, miraculously, because the earth is canting a single one-trillionth of a degree in this direction for a long period of time, rather than in that direction.”

And then he says this: “When I am alone in the woods, and the struggle seems insignificant or futile, or when I am in a public meeting and am being kicked all over the place, I tell myself that little things matter – and I believe that they do. I believe that even if your heart leans just a few degrees to the left or the right of center, that with

enough resolve, which can substitute for mass, and enough time, a wobble will one day begin, and the ice will begin to form, where for a long time previous there might have been none. Keep it up for a lifetime or two or three, and then one day – it must – the ice will begin to slide.”

Are you keeping at the business of purity and holiness? It is about your heart leaning a degree at a time for the long haul. Until one day, Christ’s righteousness in you becomes this unstoppable force on the move.

One last characteristic the Israelites demonstrated was **Rejoicing in God over everything.**

And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

Rejoicing because God had given them great joy. They weren’t rejoicing because of the great wall they’d built – they were rejoicing because of God’s grace. I love the visual of that whole community up on the wall, singing their lungs out. I love it because it literally places worship above everything else for them. Their top priority is praising God. They’re walking above all their work, it is as if they are covering everything they had done with a layer of prayer and worship.

Above our work for God must come our delight in God. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart and mind and strength. We can’t dedicate what we do to God without also dedicating our hearts to God. And the way we’ll know he has our hearts is to see if he has our time and attention.

Several years ago, Laura Shapiro had an article in Newsweek called, “The Myth of Quality Time.” It was exposing the idea that had become popular that working parents didn’t need to worry about how much time they were spending with their kids as long as the time they did spend was “quality.” She wrote, “Kid’s don’t do meetings. You can’t raise them in short scheduled bursts. They need lots of attention.”

All relationships require time and attention in order to thrive. We can’t expect to enjoy God much or know him well if we’re never paying attention to his presence.

I’m not talking about carving out a few minutes for prayer and Bible study. I’m talking about transforming all of our life into an act of love for God. Covering everything we do with an attitude of worship, just as the Israelites covered the work they did on the wall by walking above it praising God.

One of my favorite stories of someone doing this is about the monk Brother Lawrence. He wasn’t the brightest man ever. He didn’t have a good enough education to become a full-fledged priest, so he was more like a volunteer monk. He got assigned to kitchen duty and other menial chores nobody wanted, taking care of the needs of his superiors.

But he thought about God differently than the people around him. He said, “You know, people work so hard to go through all these rituals to try and make themselves aware of God’s presence. What if it’s much simpler than that? Wouldn’t it just be easier to do all our ordinary work out of love for him?”

And that ordinary work became the medium through which he loved God and experienced God’s love for him. It was what he called practicing the presence of God. He said, “We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him...It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God.”

I want that. I want to be able to do even the smallest things as an act of love for God. Worship redirects our hearts and gathers up all that we have done and accomplished and offers it to God. And that is what dedication is all about.

So the question is: Am I ready? Am I ready to climb up on the wall and say “this piece of my life is Gods”? Am I ready to release control to him? Am I ready to remove what’s harmful? Am I ready, as Oswald Chambers puts it, to obey him with glad, reckless joy?

As the Israelites marched around the wall at their dedication, the songs they were singing were undoubtedly the Psalms. One that seems tailor written to be a soundtrack for their march was Psalm 48.

Psalm 48:12-14

*Walk about Zion, go around her,
count her towers,
consider well her ramparts,
view her citadels,
that you may tell of them to the next generation.
For this God is our God for ever and ever;
he will be our guide even to the end.*

As we choose to dedicate ourselves and our lives to God, it is always a response to what we see he as done. As we walk the wall of our lives, looking at the various pieces of our world, we can see God’s presence and his activity, everywhere we look. And hallelujah - this God is our God forever and ever. He will be our guide even to the end.