

Series: A.D.: THE UNFINISHED CHAPTER - June 12, 2011

GOD IS ALWAYS TEARING DOWN WALLS!

Acts 10, 15

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1. I spent my earliest years in small town Pennsylvania where the majority of people worked the coal mines. I don't **ever** remember us locking our doors at night—and I think we were typical. The only thing that ever creeped me out was when an old lady with dementia once wandered across the street and right into our house. Apart from that—I can never remember **not** feeling safe. I understood walls in terms of **privacy**—but that's all.

-Then we moved right into the roughest neighbourhood in Erie, PA—a small city of about 150,000 people—and I found that that walls **also** provide safety. My parents warned my brother and I about wandering around—and told us that a kid had been murdered and stuffed in a trash can not far from our house. **That** got my attention!
 - a. Walls are good things. Necessary. The wall we're all most familiar with is our skin—the largest organ in our body. Skin is a boundary that keeps what's **outside** of our body—**out**—and keeps what's inside—**in**. This wall protects us from getting poisoned or infected or waterlogged. A hole in it is **not** a good thing!
 - b. But some walls are bad—and just need to be torn down. Remember Ronald Reagan's words from a speech he gave at the Berlin Wall back in the 80s? "Mr. Gorbachev, **Tear down this wall!**" [pic] Why would he say something like that? Well, because this wall wasn't about privacy or protection; it was about keeping people locked into an oppressive system of government.
 - c. Some walls in our world are necessary. But some are destructive; based on hatred, intolerance, and prejudice—and preference! And they're hard to deal with because they're invisible. People can build these kinds of walls out of almost **anything**—political opinions, religion, race, social class—or even **crazy** things, like what you eat, what kind of music you like—or where you live.
-Being **inside** feels cool. Secure. Anyone ever been on the **outside** of one of these walls? Doesn't feel good, does it? And that's why Jesus came to tear them down—and that's what we see in the story of the Early Church.
2. Let me read a few passages from the New Testament that are real wall-busters:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26-28 NIV)

...Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Colossians 3:11 NIV)

-Let me give you some background. When Jesus came to Israel as their Messiah, the cultural walls surrounding Judaism were high sky-high. These invisible barriers kept Gentiles, Samaritans and the diseased away—and grew to include others, such as the sinful and people of the opposite sex. It was clear from Jesus’ encounters that if you **crossed** these barriers—it meant trouble!

- a. Now, in all fairness, the OT law **did** help create some of these walls. God was trying to keep people distinct from the other cultures and the incredible destructive worship they were involved in. God has also given laws about touching dead bodies or people with skin diseases—basically to keep the people healthy. But **somehow**, even though God made it clear that He wanted his people to be a light to the Gentiles, these laws became walls that reinforced prejudice, separation and contempt.
- b. When Jesus came, people were quite surprised to see Him ignore these laws. He talked to Gentiles, made Samaritans the heroes of some of his stories—and freely touched diseased people to heal them. As a Rabbi, he was supposed to keep himself pure! In fact, in a single day Jesus blew through a bunch of these barriers by asking for a drink from a Samaritan woman—wrong race, wrong sex, wrong past! Even his disciple raised their eyebrows on that one!

-I could go on and on; Jesus ate with tax collectors, had prostitutes crash dinner parties to anoint him with oil and wipe his feet with their hair, and praised Roman soldiers for their faith. And He clearly said while He was doing this that He was the **I Am**, the Son of God.

- c. In His last words to his followers, Jesus makes it clear that He wants the Good News to include and engage **everyone!**

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NIV)

-His followers would’ve secretly thought, “You want us to go to **them!?** But when the Spirit came on Pentecost, the walls began crumbling—the first one being the **language** barrier. God made sure that **every single language** in the audience that day was spoken through His people. And Peter made it clear that the Holy Spirit, because of Jesus, was now available to everyone: old **and** young; men **and** women; insiders **and** outsiders! That day, the walls began coming down.

3. Truth is, the story of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit kicking down **all** the walls of exclusion and hostility. The first walls were the subtle ones—like the wall between the Hebrew-speaking Jews and the **Hellenized** or Greek-speaking Jews. There was some sense among the people who had come back the Israel after the Exile that they were better, more godly than the ones who stayed. So there was a subtle barrier. It would be a little like a good British subject who moves to Mississippi and abandons the Queen’s English for a drawl—and tea and biscuits for chitlins and grits. They’re **still** English—but not **quite!**

- a. This barrier comes up when the Greek-speaking widows complain that they're not getting treated the same as the Hebrew widows in the daily food distribution. The disciples solved the problem brilliantly—they chose 7 Greek-speaking Jews to head up the program! **Crash!** The wall came down!
 - b. And, kinda like dominoes, that wall coming down seemed to break down the wall between the Jews and the Samaritans. Philip, a hellenized Jew who **knew** what it was like to be treated as an inferior—migrated to Samaria after his co-worker, Stephen, was murdered. He looked at the Samaritan people and said to himself, "Why not? Jesus loved them and told us to reach them!" Another wall came crashing down as Samaritans believed in Jesus by the hundreds—and then received the Holy Spirit.
4. The main wall left is the one between Jews and Gentiles. And **this** wall is the biggest and thickest. All through the Old Testament, you hear prophets talk about how one day the **nations** will worship God, how Israel will be a **light** to the nations, how Israel will **bless** that nations—**lead** the nations. But there is almost nothing about God removing the dividing wall that distinguishes Israel from the nations.

-The Jewish nation **identified** themselves as God's people by how they were **different** from everyone else. They had the Law. They had the temple where God met them. God **chose** them as a people when He chose Abraham. God chose them again when He brought them out of slavery. To take away that distinction between Jews and Gentiles was to take away **everything**.

- a. This is how God sets it up. He starts by sending an angel to visit a Roman military officer. Let me read the record:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." (Acts 10:1-6 NIV)

-Interesting—because the destruction of this wall doesn't start until 10 years after the church is started on Pentecost. I'm not sure if God got tired of waiting or what—but, as you can see, **He** initiates everything by having Cornelius send for Peter. And that brings up something else. Cornelius was an **incredible** man—good in every respect. He prayed, worshipped, gave to the poor—and yet the message from the angel isn't, "Just keep up the good work, Neil—you'll be fine!" No. The angel was clear—send for Peter—**he has a message you need to hear!** That message was about Jesus.

- b. Meanwhile, God is preparing Peter in Joppa. It's almost time for lunch—and as Peter prays—he has a vision.

He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. (Acts 10:10-16 NIV)

-Peter, undoubtedly, thinks that God is testing him—to see whether he'll disobey and eat food that isn't kosher. But then God says, **Don't call anything impure that God has made clean!** And this happens **three** times—and then **three Gentiles**—unclean from a Jewish perspective--knock on the door downstairs, and call for him specifically. Their message is that their boss, Neil—okay, Cornelius—has had a vision from God and sent them to bring him. And God says, "It's okay, Peter! **Go!**"

- c. The encounter between Cornelius and Peter is profound. Cornelius, this big deal Roman army captain—has gathered all his relatives and friends—and right in front of them, falls to his knees at Peter's feet! Peter says, "Stop—I'm human just like you!" And Peter begins to speak about his **own** amazement at what God has arranged.

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. (Acts 10:34-36 NIV)

-Peter had not even finished his message about forgiveness for sins through Jesus—when God broke through!

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." (Acts 10:44-47 NIV)

-**Crash!** The massive wall began to crumble. These people didn't pray the sinners prayer, come to the altar or fall on their knees. While Peter was **speaking** the Holy Spirit fell on them—just as he had that group of 120 original disciples. **No distinction whatsoever!** Then they went public—and were baptized.

- d. **Boy** did that incident raise eyebrows!

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” (Acts 11:1-3 NIV)

-Well, when Peter told them the whole story—what are they going to say? “God can’t do that to us! We don’t *like* Gentiles!” Not when Jesus specifically *told* them to take the Good News to the nations! Then this:

“So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:17-18 NIV)

- e. Most of you know that this is not one of those, ***And they lived happily ever after...!*** things. The first church conference was held over ***What does a believer in Jesus look like?*** The Jewish believers thought that they needed to follow all the Jewish laws ***and*** believe in Jesus. The council said, ***No! They do not have to become Jews to be followers of Jesus!*** And this continued to trouble the church for years. These barriers—built over centuries—***never*** go down easily. And people always seem to find a reason why God likes walls. But He ***doesn’t!***

5. It is ***so*** important...***SO critical...***for us to understand that Jesus came to kick down walls. Between us and God, and between us and each other. ***That*** is what reconciliation is all about! Paul, an early leader who was right in the thick of this controversy says:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And *he has committed to us* the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-19 NIV)

-The Good News of Jesus is about God kicking down walls. To emphasize this, he ripped the curtain in two that separated the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple from everything else. There is ***no one*** who is right enough in his eyes to erect a wall. ***No one!*** Not when He is making peace everywhere and bringing ***everyone*** home! The story of Acts, I repeat, is the story of walls getting kicked down!

- a. Isn’t it great that after 2000 years, we’ve finally solved this problem of walls! Like, after all that division—and 2000 years of mess, hard feelings and bloodshed—we’ve ***finally*** learned our lesson? You don’t see any walls, do you? Well, ***actually...***our temptation is always to rebuild them.

*Have we tended to rebuild the walls between races that God kicked down 2000 years ago? What a mess! The mess of slavery, Nazism—and how aboriginals have been treated.

*We can't relate well to Paul's declaration that in Christ, there is no slave or free. But we **do** see a division between the surgeons—and the people who clean up the OR when they're done, right? They don't usually sit together at hockey games—or do lunch, right?

*Think there **might** be some walls between men—or are from Mars, and women—who are from Venus? Sometimes the antagonism is **thick!**

*Has anyone visited a university recently? There is a kind of mutual disdain for the over-educated who **love** books—and the under-educated—who feel stupid.

*Political views? Oh my **word!** There are two general groups that feel **very** smug. Liberal people who see themselves as broad-minded saviours of the down-trodden—and conservative people who think they need to save the world from liberals who are destroying the world and sending it to hell in a hand-basket. Anyone see these walls?

*And there are walls between the rich and the poor. The church had barely gotten away from sharing everything with incredible generosity—when it started up again. On the days of the love feasts in Corinth—the wealthy could get to the place where they gathered early—and would hork down all the food before the poor came with Kraft dinner casseroles.

*It doesn't take much to create a wall. It happens with what kind of music you like, whether you eat meat or not, whether you loves dogs or cats, whether you go to the gym—or, when the urge hits you to exercise, you lay down until it goes away.

*And there are walls between secular and religious. We used to sing a little song when I was a kid in Sunday School. It went like this, **One door and only one—and yet it's sides are two. I'm on the inside—on which side are you?** Man, talk about **walls!** "I'm **inside!** **You know, where GOD is!** **You're outside (where the DEVIL is!)** **You're not ONE** of us!

- b. Know how walls are created? We create them based on pride—something God despises more than any other sin. And many times this pride is based on the **need to be RIGHT!** Anyone who's ever felt this need—besides me? Well, that wall then gets reinforced on the **other** side by resentment; suspicion; bitterness. And it doesn't take **much** to make this happen.

-This is **very** easy to see in these accounts. Imagine living among people who think they're better than you—simply because they don't have your accent, which sounds stupid to them. What would you think? **Who do you think YOU are?**

-Think about the Romans living among a group of people who see them and refer to them as **unclean**—and won't even go to their homes! Anyone ever had a neat freak or a germ freak visit your house—and act like if they use your bathroom—they'll get the plague? You feel hurt—**angry!** And **that's** what

grows fences; people on the one side who think they're better, more spiritual, right—and people on the other who feel insulted; who **resent** their arrogance.

-Think for just a minute about how some of the walls created in the past have fuelled bloodshed, animosity, distrust, wars—and **unbelievable** social chaos and injustice. Think of how people, on the **inside**, have used these walls to protect their interests at the expense of others. Think of how these walls have fuelled the hatred that drives the chaos in the Middle East and among the poor. **That** is why God **hates** them—and kicks them down every chance He gets! Friends, **that** is what the Good News is about. Tearing down walls—between God and humankind—and between us and everyone else.

- c. There are **two** things we need to see; first, we need to see both the invisible fences we've built--**and** the deep-seated prejudices and feelings we've created in our hearts. Second, we need to be crystal clear on what Jesus does with barriers...fences...walls:

-Paul, in talking about the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, put it like this:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16 NIV)

-Just in case it's not clear—Jesus went to the cross to **destroy** the barriers and walls caused by pride and hostility. Jesus is **always** about reconciliation—about making peace, about us, as his **body** being one. By the way—how many of you think a **body** can be effective if it's in several big pieces? That's not a good thing—because all the blood runs out and life ceases. And **that's** why Jesus said, "I want my people to be **ONE**. Father, make them **ONE!**"

6. I want to talk about that for a few minutes in closing. Jesus was clear that the **danger** for his people would not be the Gates of Hell—the walls Satan has erected. He said, "Those walls will **not** prevail!" However, Jesus had to continually tear down walls between his own followers. The argument always seemed to be about, "Who's the greatest?" And it still happens, doesn't it? Among believers, division has **always** arisen over who's most faithful to Jesus and what He said.

-And **this** has descended into **denominations**. Anyone know how many denominations there are out there? **38,000!** We have divided over just about **everything**—what kind of building, whether to have a building, what kind of baptism, the evidence of the Holy Spirit, the gift of tongues, prayer, how to celebrate communion, the role of women in leadership, whether people can worship without a pipe organ. Name it, we've probably divided over it!

- a. Know what's at the core of every wall? The need to be **right!** It's not enough for us to think, "You know—I think this might be the best interpretation of this..."

It's, "Well, if *I'm right*—and, of course, I am—then *they're wrong*. And being *right* makes me closer to Jesus and his plan for this planet—and them being *wrong* means that, well, they're going to *hinder* what Jesus wants to do!" For some reason we never seem to get how God *hates* pride!

-Truth is—our sense that we're *right* is based on our passions and gifting and interests—not on the overall scope of biblical truth. There is room for a *lot* of variety. The ongoing analogy for how Jesus' people fit together is the human body. Ears are *very* different than livers. I have trouble hearing with my ears—but I've never heard a *word* with my liver! But then, I've never stored enzymes in my ear. Nostrils are *not* lungs; ankles are *not* eyelids. And *that's a good thing, right? Right?*

-Should people be passionate about different areas? **Absolutely!** Should people be *excited* by different ways to serve? **Of course!** But we are specifically told *not* to judge others based on what *we* love and do. Paul said:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6 NIV)

- b. So, where does this go off-track and build walls? The same place it *always* does! "The way *I* see God's work is the *right* way—and the way they see it is the *wrong* way!" And then we build walls to distinguish between the people who are *right*—and the people who are *wrong*—and the same stupid thing happens all over again. People get hurt and the mission of Jesus gets sabotaged.

-And our calling? It's to humility. To love. To unity. To *tear down* the walls—not build them! God's call is to *renounce* arrogance and the need to be right—to have others be more like us! And God asks every fresh generation of followers, "Will you *tear down* walls—and not *build* them?"

-Know what the danger is here at The Olive Branch? First, we are pretty well educated—and a lot of us have positions that, in our world, would be considered prestigious. We're used to people listening to—and sometimes doing—what we say. That breeds self-confidence. We're also *passionate* people. And when *self-confidence* gets combined with *passion*—know what it can lead to? Being *opinionated*. That is—being *right* most of the time—even when we aren't. That, friends, is our danger—and it's *subtle!*

-And instead of the *humility* Jesus calls us to—there is an arrogance that starts to build. And on the *other* side of that arrogance—is resentment. And we can feel so *biblical*, so *spiritual*, so *right*—that we've captured God's heart when no one else has. This happens over Christian schools, worship styles, teen ministry, inner city ministry, compassion ministry, oversees missions—it happens *wherever* there is passion and an important work to be done!

- c. Let's be clear what we're about. If Jesus, through the cross, **destroyed** the walls and barriers between us, calls us to unity, prayed to the Father that we be **One**—and gave us the Spirit to make that happen—what are we doing if we choose instead to be **right**?

-Well, let me demonstrate. We dismantle the cross—and use the pieces to create a fence. A barrier. A wall. Or a ladder! Something that makes it clear that **we're** on the inside—and others are on the **outside!** You can be doing **good** things; **right** things—but if there is no love (which is what barriers destroy)—then it's **nothing!** When you build a fence—or a ladder, there's no cross!

7. Today is a celebration of what God is up to here at The Olive Branch. We **Olives** are a group of very passionate—and, sometimes, very opinionated people! But we are a **Body**—with very, **very** different parts. And we are called by Jesus—to leave the walls down that **He's** torn down—and not build any more. See, because He's wanting to use an army of **very** different people, with **very** different passions—to reach a world that has **very** different people with **very** different passions. **Everyone** is necessary. **Everyone** counts! And the ground is always, **always, ALWAYS** level at the foot of the cross.