

# Keeping the Faith of Jesus

by Tom Macartney

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of keeping the faith of Jesus and building the walls of Jerusalem, both physically and spiritually, to maintain a clear testimony and a strong spiritual foundation in the church.*

**Scripture:** 2 Timothy 2:3

**Topics:** "Spiritual Integrity", "Faithfulness"

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## Description

Tom Macartney preaches on the importance of 'keeping the faith of Jesus' as exemplified by Paul in his letters to Timothy. Paul's commitment to guarding the truths of the gospel and the authentic Christian life serves as a model for believers to uphold the testimony of Jesus in the face of challenges and contradictions. Drawing parallels to Nehemiah's mission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, the sermon emphasizes the need for the church to maintain spiritual integrity and separate from worldly influences, just as Nehemiah sought to restore the city's walls as a reflection of the people's spiritual state.

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## Transcript

These must surely be among the most moving words ever penned, for they are the words of an innocent old man in a Roman dungeon awaiting his execution. They come in the last and very important letter written by Paul, written to his faithful friend and fellow-worker, Timothy. He writes of fighting the good fight of the faith (1 Tim. 6:12), of the spiritual warfare in which he has been engaged all his life as a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3). He writes of finishing the race, his God-appointed calling and task (Acts 20:24; Heb. 12:1, 2). He uses the word used by the Lord Jesus on the cross, "It is finished", to signify He had completed the great work of redemption the father had given Him to do (John 17:4; 19:30). Paul also knows his work is done. But our present concern is with his words, "I have kept the faith." What does he mean by keeping the faith?

In his letters to Timothy, Paul urges him to guard the treasure entrusted to him, which is not only the truths of the gospel, the securities of the faith, but also the authentic Christian life and experience which are its true expression. He also warns Timothy that in later times some will abandon the faith (1 Tim. 4:1; 6:20, 21; 2 Tim. 1:14. See also, Luke 18:8; Matt. 24:11-13.) It is important to realise that the faith is much more than the great foundation truths of the gospel; it is the testimony of Jesus, the faith of Jesus (Rev. 1:9; 14:12), the good confession of Christ Jesus the faithful witness (1 Tim. 6:13; Rev. 1:5). The faith is the faith of Jesus: it is all that He was, said and did (and refrained from saying and doing). Note the eloquence of His silences and the power of His presence, for example, before Pilate and at the cross. It is His total

life, in both word and deed. And it is this life, which is light, that is meant to be seen now in His church, which should be like 'a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden ... and, clear as crystal' (Matt. 5:14; Rev. 21:10, 11). The faith is not the Christian religion as generally understood, still less the consensus of all religious notions found within the professing church. It is the unique life and witness of Jesus Himself shining in this dark world (1 John 1:1-4). This is the faith that Paul kept and sought to embody in his life and service, amid many contradictions of it. Let us consider some of these contradictions of the faith.

Throughout his life, as his letters show, Paul encountered professing Christians who had wandered away from the truth, made shipwreck concerning the faith, were enemies of the cross of Christ (2 Tim. 2:17, 18; 1 Tim. 1:19; Phil. 3:18). He was concerned too about the carnality, immaturity and confusion in the churches (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:1-3), and about such as Demas, who failed to keep the faith. "Demas forsook me, having loved this present world," he wrote (2 Tim. 4:10). He was concerned when he met the disciples at Ephesus who had been converted through Apollos, who himself, at the time, only had a limited understanding of the faith, so that these disciples, inevitably, only had a limited Christian experience (Acts 18:24 - 19:7). What problems are caused by inadequate gospels. How many Christians today are largely ignorant of the true faith of Jesus, the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

Then Paul would have been concerned about the tragically compromised church at Jerusalem, which, 25 years after Pentecost, was still zealous for the law (Acts 21:20). These believers were hardly keeping the faith that he preached.

Another example of not keeping the faith was the sad declension in the church generally by the end of the apostolic age when a new generation had taken over (Revelation 2 and 3). Surely a solemn warning to us all. It is not the generation gap, so called, we should be worrying about (there is no such thing in Christ), but this terrible tendency to fall, to decline spiritually, like the church at Ephesus. "Remember the height from which you have fallen," Jesus says. Keeping the faith of Jesus, according to the scriptures and according to the Spirit, in sound doctrine and in Christ-like living, as individuals and under the headship of Christ as His church in our meetings, is a great matter. Are we as concerned about the quality and genuineness of our living and witness and church life as we are about our doctrine?

The significance of Nehemiah's building the walls of Jerusalem

Paul's keeping the faith of Jesus is mirrored in Nehemiah's building the walls of Jerusalem, as we shall see. But first we must remind ourselves, briefly, of what had gone before Nehemiah's mission in 445 BC. In 536 BC, Zerubbabel returned from Babylon with some 50,000 exiles. They set up the altar (foreshadowing the cross), and laid the foundations of the temple (foreshadowing the church). They were bitterly opposed by the people of the land, the Samaritans (Ezra 4), and the temple was not completed till 516 BC, through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1. 6. 14). It is important to note the long gap, of some 70 years, between the completion of the temple in 516 BC, and the building of the walls in 445 BC. Why was this? Surely, for two reasons: the continual opposition, and the low spiritual state of the people of God. Few details are given in scripture about this period; they were troubled times in the Persian Empire. The story of Esther comes between Ezra 6 and 7 (a period of 58 years) and Ezra's return in 458 BC with a few thousand more exiles, in Chapter 7. But it seems safe to say that the rebuilding of the walls was always in view, that some attempts were made to do it, but that the outward opposition and the inward condition of the people thwarted all efforts, and the wall remained broken down, with its gates burned with fire (Neh. 1:3).

It was this that concerned Nehemiah. The altar was there, the temple was there, so the central testimony to the true God was still there in Jerusalem, but there was no city, for a city must have walls. And the state of the walls and gates reflected the state of the people, and tended to neutralize the testimony of the altar and temple. The whole witness of the remnant was being weakened and undermined because of this. There was no clearly defined city with walls of demarcation, anyone could wander in and out, and did so. A city must have walls and gates. All was confusion. No wonder Nehemiah was heartbroken and stirred to action. And is this not a remarkably accurate picture of the church today? Is it not like a city without walls? If, for example, we seek to define the faith of Jesus, or raise the matter of the new birth among professing Christians, or ask questions regarding the validity of some of our church life, we are only really seeking to build the walls, but we are certain to meet the kind of opposition that Nehemiah did.

Before considering some of the details of the situation in Nehemiah's day, bearing in mind he was not only building the walls, but dealing with the spiritual condition of the people, the one being the outward expression of the other, we must note the long-standing, mixed-up and complex situation which lies in the background of Ezra and Nehemiah. This will provide us with a valuable key to understanding the details.

We must go back to the division of the kingdom after Solomon, ca. 950 BC, when the ten tribes (Israel) broke away from Judah and Benjamin, and Jeroboam set up an alternative and false worship of Jehovah at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12). Add to this the introduction of Baal-worship by Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 16:30-33) and the religious confusion in the northern Kingdom was complete. Of course there was, as always, a minority in Israel who remained true to the Lord. To these Elijah and Elisha ministered, but the situation was such that judgment was inevitable, and Israel was carried away into the Assyrian captivity in 721 BC, 115 years before the Babylonian exile of Judah (2 Kings 17:6).

Assyrian policy was to transfer some of the population of lands they conquered to other parts of their empire. So, some in Israel were transferred to Assyria, and foreigners were planted in Samaria. In this way, a hopelessly mixed-up population and worship was produced in the province of Samaria. It was into this situation that the remnant of Judah returned from Babylon (there was no return of Israel). This explains why they refused the help proffered by the mixed population around them to re-build the temple, and why, later, Nehemiah refused their help in rebuilding the walls. Sanballat and many in Samaria would, no doubt, have claimed to be worshippers of Jehovah, but such was the religious confusion (as in Christendom today) their claim had to be rejected. Only those who were by birth (and could show it; Ezra 2:59) the genuine people of God and true worshippers of the true God could be accepted (John 4:20-24). This distinction between the true people of God and the mixed multitude was the great problem then; it has ever been, and still is today. Only those who are truly born-again are true Christians, and only such can worship the true God in spirit and in truth. But to take such a position is to believe in building the walls, like Nehemiah, and keeping the faith of Jesus, like Paul.

Looking now at some of the details in Nehemiah, we should note:

1. The bitter opposition of the mixed population outside the city, combining physical attack with every kind of intrigue (chapter 6). (Behind this is the spiritual warfare in which all the Lord's people are ever involved.) Here is what the N.T. calls the world, this fallen world, and particularly, the religious world with its hatred of the clear-cut gospel and its love of consensus, compromise and syncretism. The media is full of this today.
2. The enemy within, the compromised leadership, many of whom were in league with the enemy outside (6:17-19). (The major problem of false leaders and prophets runs through Scripture.) The fact that the

grandson of Eliashib, the highpriest, was son-in-law to Sanballat, and Eliashib provided Tobiah, the Ammonite, with accommodation in the temple while Nehemiah was away, reporting back to the king, are startling examples of this. Thus the highpriest was allied to Nehemiah's bitterest enemies! (13:4-9, 28, 29). We do well to take seriously what Nehemiah (and Malachi, who prophesied about this time) have to say about compromised and false leadership, for it is very much with us today. Note also the presence of false prophets (6:10-14). What a need there is today for true, strong and spiritual leadership, such as Nehemiah gave.

3. The condition of the people. We may mention two things concerning this. (i) the perennial problem of intermarriage with the surrounding mixed population, a matter prominent in both Ezra and Nehemiah. We should beware of limiting this in our application to marriage between Christian and unbeliever. It goes far deeper than this obvious application. This separation from all foreigners and the mixed multitude (9:2; 13:3; etc.) brings up the whole question of a Christian's, and the church's, relationship to the world in all aspects of its life, thoughts and ways. (Many Scriptures spring to mind, e.g. Rom. 12:1, 2; 1 John 2:15-17; John 15:19; 17:14.) Today, there is so much of the world and its ways in the church that they often seem indistinguishable. Nehemiah noted that half the children of these mixed marriages could not even speak the language of Zion but only that of the surrounding nations (13:23-27). How painfully true this is today, when compromise with the world is the norm, and the kind of strong leadership seen in Nehemiah is virtually unknown and would certainly be rejected, even though it did but foreshadow the Lord's cleansing of the temple. (Note the presence of men of Tyre trading in the city on the sabbath (13:16-18). Tyre was a great commercial centre. Note Ezekiel 26-28.)

(ii) The perennial problem of relationships; keeping the 2nd commandment, "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:39), and also, for Christians, the new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34, 35). In Nehemiah's day this problem revealed itself in the old curse of money lending, with the rich profiteering at the expense of the poor, and reducing them to slavery (Chapter 5). Let us remember that the application of what was happening then is to Christians now, not to the world, and that we must look behind the symptoms then to their underlying cause, to get the message for ourselves. We are hardly likely to be guilty of the evils mentioned, yet may be guilty of their root cause, a wrong attitude to possessions. And let us remember that rich is a relative word. To have more than the necessities of life is to be rich in relation to those who do not have these (Matt. 6:25-34). Today, in the West, the so-called middle classes must be accounted among the rich. We shall do well to note how much there is in scripture about the menace of money and the perils of possessions (Matt. 19:16-26; Jas. 2:1-17; 5:1-6). Most of the human race have always been poor, and exploited by the minority of rich. This is to be expected in this fallen world. But Christians should show forth the love of Christ in their life together, and to all in need, in stark contrast to the world: "Let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:16-18).

It was this kind of situation among the people of God that shocked Nehemiah. It was a complete contradiction of the altar, the temple, and the walls they were building (5:6-13). The existence of such distinctions, rich and poor, and of social classes, among the Lord's people has always produced tragic results. All that we are and have, in His sovereign ordering, is for the benefit of all. At the heart of this problem is our attitude to our money and possessions. The rich Christian who believes his money entitles him to a higher standard of living than his poor brother (with all that this means in practice - luxury home, expensive holidays and so on), and imagines that when he has given his tenth to the Lord, the rest is his to spend on himself, is in great danger. The scriptures clearly teach that everything we possess is His, and

to be used for Him and others, and on our own legitimate needs. We are only stewards of His estate. We are not, of course, called to give away automatically or thoughtlessly, what He has entrusted to us, but to use it, wisely, under His direction. The point is, we own nothing. The fact that there are poor, middle-class and rich churches, or groups within them, speaks to our condemnation. This is a great evil. Nehemiah's own example in this matter is impressive (5:14-19); that of the Lord Jesus even more so (2 Cor. 8:9, in its context). Alas, the spirit of the affluent West has infiltrated the church. Our use of money (particularly what we spend on ourselves) is a useful guide to our own true spiritual state.

4. Ezra's teaching of the word of God. Note the crucial importance of this, its powerful effects upon the people, and the following points in chapters 8, 9 and 13. (i) The people's desire to hear the Word. "They asked Ezra to bring the book." Hungry hearts are essential for effective teaching (8:1).

(ii) They listened attentively from day-break till noon; what a rebuke to our restlessness after about 20 minutes (8:3).

(iii) When the book was opened they stood and worshipped, showing that they realised that the Lord was present, and the importance of listening (8:5-6).

(iv) The reading and teaching was clear and understandable, rooted in the word and free of merely human thoughts hung upon a text. The word was expounded (8:7, 8).

(v) It is impressive that Ezra's was not a one man ministry. Many were involved with him in explaining the word (8:4, 7, 12). Invaluable though gifted teachers are, we have here a little glimpse of how the church functioned in the New Testament. It built itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-16).

(vi) One of the results was that the leaders discovered in the book of the law the Feast of Tabernacles, which all the people then celebrated. It is significant that it was this particular feast that was rediscovered. The people of God always need reminding that they are a pilgrim people. We are strangers and pilgrims here (8:13-18; Heb. 11:13-16).

(vii) This reading of and responding to the Word was an on-going thing, no mere passing phase. We read of the people's repentance, separation from all foreigners, confession, worship, prayers, and covenant with the Lord, and their obedience in regard to Ammon and Moab (9:1-38; 13:1-3).

(viii) It is clear that Nehemiah governed according to the word in all that he did (13:4-31). What a need there is today for a Spirit anointed teaching of the word, to responsive hearts, leading to transformed lives.

5. The Message of the walls and the gates. The walls declared what was in and what was out. They said, there is no place inside these walls for the world, the flesh or the devil. They defined the faith of Jesus, so to speak. In N.T. terms they defined the boundary between the old creation and the new: put off the old man, put on the new man (Co1. 3:1-17). The gates declared two things:

(i) Those inside must not be insular or feel superior; no place here for exclusivism or pharisaism, but be outgoing in service, reaching out to those outside.

(ii) Those outside may enter this city on its king's terms (Comp. the walls and gates of the Holy City, Rev. 21:1 - 22:5).

6. The problem of the rubbish. "The strength of the labourers is weakening, and there is so much rubbish that we cannot work on the wall" (4:10). Our fallen human natures, our ideas, plans, efforts and so on, are always a hindrance to real building; it is essential (and exhausting) to get rid of the rubbish. The whole message of the cross, preached, understood, accepted and applied, alone makes possible the building of the church. It is not enough that we are taught that Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). We must also be taught that we died with Christ (Rom. 6:8). The rubbish must go. The new Jerusalem is pure gold, no rubbish there (Rev. 21:18).

7. How Nehemiah acted in faith. (i) We note how he was guided. God put His concern about the situation into Nehemiah's heart. He acted in faith, which God honoured. It was a simple partnership. Nothing outwardly supernatural occurred (1:4; 2:12).

(ii) We note how impressed Artaxerxes the king must have been by Nehemiah's personal testimony and integrity to have granted his request (2:1-6).

(iii) We note his wisdom and foresight in getting a letter of authority from the king to the governors beyond the river, among whom would be Sanballat, governor of Samaria (2:7-11). He was no mere enthusiast, but one intent on finishing his task.

(iv) We note how he viewed the walls and gates of Jerusalem by night to see for himself the real situation before he told anyone of what God had put into his heart to do for Jerusalem (2:12-18).

(v) We note his decisive, even ruthless, leadership (2:20; 5:6, 7; 6:3, 11, 12; 13:4-9, 28, 29). We find it difficult today to see that this is one aspect of the love of God in action, because much of our understanding of the word love is mere emotional sentimentality (Heb. 12:5, 6).

(vi) We note how Nehemiah placed the work of building on a war footing because of the many forms of enemy activity, including guerrilla warfare, deceit, accusation, discouragement, fear and so on (chapter 4). We note the mention of prayer, watchfulness, weapons, the trumpet to rally support at points of attack, and the emphasis on building and fighting together, and how, later, the gates were carefully guarded (13:19); and we recall how the building of the church and spiritual warfare are linked in Ephesians.

(vii) In the last two verses Nehemiah provides a kind of summary of his work among the people, a work of cleansing and appointing, removing everything not God's will and ordering everything as He would have it.

8. The wholehearted committal of the few. It must have been a deep disappointment to Nehemiah to find that the response of the majority of the people was, in truth, superficial, and that whenever his back was turned, many reverted to their old ways. Eliashib, the highpriest, was a glaring example of this (chapter 13). In spite of all Nehemiah did, the underlying problems persisted. We read of initial enthusiasm (2:18), of the people having a mind to work (4:6), but also of some becoming discouraged (4:10), and of lazy leaders (3:5). How true all this is to life and experience. But when it came to re-peopling Jerusalem, for the city was large but the population small (7:4), we read that there were those who willingly offered themselves to live in Jerusalem, at the heart of things (11:1, 2), no doubt at great personal cost (having to uproot themselves and move into the city), and real risk (for Jerusalem was the prime target of the enemy). A tenth of the population were chosen by lot to live in the city, but the wholehearted few chose to do so. It is significant that a list was made of all who lived in Jerusalem. The Lord takes note of everything.

Conclusion

Paul's concern to "keep the faith of Jesus", genuine Christianity, in his day when things were beginning to go wrong in the church, is mirrored in Nehemiah's concern to build the Walls and Gates of Jerusalem which were, as we have seen, the outward expression of the inward and spiritual state of the people of God in his day. Their concern sprang out of the actual state of the Lord's people as they saw it in the light of their high calling. How far do we share their concern, for the situation in our day? How are we aware of the God-dishonouring state of the church today, with its broken down walls of testimony, considered in the light of what the N.T. sets before us as to what the church should and could be, even here on earth? Of course, we know that the Holy City, made of "pure gold" with its "Wall great and high, and twelve Gates", belongs to eternity. We are not 'perfectionists', those who think that perfection is attainable here on earth by us or in the church, but are we striving in the Lord to enter into all that we can here and now (Co1.1:24-29), or just complacently accepting the situation as if it does not really matter? The relevance of Malachi's message for our day, as it was for Nehemiah's, is impressive. It has been well summed up as a challenge to 'Unconscious Corruption'. The people and their leaders were blind to their true moral and spiritual state, like the church at Laodicea. Are we also blind? Of course, viewed from earth's standpoint, Paul might be called a failure if one considers how many deserted him and his teaching at the end of his life (2 Tim.1:15), and how the church declined so markedly in the decades after him. The same might be said of Nehemiah; his witness seems to have been largely in vain in the light of what happened in the centuries after him. The same might even be said of the Lord Jesus Himself; He died an apparent failure, with but a handful of bewildered followers. But we know the glorious truth: Who can measure the spiritual value and consequences of His total committal to His Father's will and glory? We glimpse something of the same committal in such as Paul and Nehemiah. They point the way, like signposts, for all who want to do the will of God. The purpose of God is only ever partially realised in history, on earth and in this life, and then only in a minority of His people. This is crystal clear from Scripture and history. But the contribution of this minority is incalculable in the divine plan. The Day of Resurrection alone will reveal the true value of everything.

The fact that so many Christians seem (perhaps through ignorance) quite content in 'Babylon', the place of confusion, is no reason for our not following in the steps of those who returned to Jerusalem, the place of the will of God. (Note: While there was no Altar or temple in Babylon, and therefore only a limited Testimony to the true God, He did not forsake His people.) While the history of the remnant holds much tragic failure, for there is no escape on earth from human nature, nevertheless it was to Jerusalem, not Babylon, that Christ came. Those who "keep the faith of Jesus" prepare for His Return. The spiritual issue in Nehemiah's day was in N.T. terms, the quality of the Church's testimony. Until the Walls were built and the Gates set up, there was no City, only confusion, weakness, contradiction and shame. How impressive, reassuring and challenging is the sight of a clearly defined walled City, "a City set on a hill" (Matt.5:14.Ps.2:6). This is the Church's calling. Nehemiah's 'Jerusalem' with its Altar, temple and Walls, foreshadows the 'Church' of which Paul constantly writes, and John's 'New Jerusalem'. If we are conscious of something missing in our lives, or, when we gather as His church, a lack of the sense of His controlling presence and life-giving speaking to our hearts, but rather a sense that we are largely going through the familiar motions of worship and listening to lifeless words, then we know what to do - Give Him His full and rightful place, as Lord, in our hearts and lives, and, as Head, in our meetings and life together. All we do is pointless unless He is its living Centre. This is the key to 'Keeping the faith of Jesus'.

"I have set watchmen upon your walls, O Jerusalem." (Isaiah 62:6-7)

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