

It is not very often that you get a chance to speak in a place whose name is such an obvious Biblical reference. I am sure that we all know the story of the conquest of Jericho from reading the Old Testament. In my mind, the word 'walls' represents a form of order of discipline, because the bricks that make it up are stacked in a manner that is neat and straight and even. God, through the prophet Amos (Amos 7.7ff), represented his chosen people, the Jews, by a wall. God had built it firm and straight and high, but the people had neglected it until it was crooked and broken down. They had broken their covenant agreement with him, and had broken his law. As we build character and discipline into our lives, we are building a wall, which God sets his plumb line against to see how straight it is. We all have places in that wall that have been neglected; places that have fallen into disrepair because of the erosive forces of the world. These walls had to be rebuilt. Those who have been farmers know that the task of checking and mending fences is not an easy one. We read in Ezra and Nehemiah about the tremendous struggle that the Jews had in trying to build the wall of their holy city back. They had to build it with a mason's trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. But with the Lord's help they did it, and so can we! This is how we must survive. But we have to continually examine the wall after it is built so that we can see its weaknesses. With one hand we are going to have to order our lives while we fight off the devil with the other.

When I think of the walls of Jericho, I think of great stones in tremendous disorder and the great power that God showed there in shattering the strength of those who opposed his people. It brings to my mind the whole theme of the fortress, the stronghold; something built for our safety and protection. Man has always felt the need to protect himself, and has built these fortresses accordingly. I remember when I was smaller, I had a real fascination for forts. I used to build them in the woods wherever I could, and even in my own backyard. I can still remember that special feeling of security I had in peering from behind old crates and logs, or from the top of a high tree. We all need the sense of protection from the things that go wrong in our lives.

Let us look for a moment at a few forts from the Bible times. Jericho, one of the first cities encountered by the Jewish nation upon entering the land of Canaan, was a city with tremendously strong walls. The people who lived there felt that they had no need of God's strength. But God leveled all of their stones, and destroyed them.

Jerusalem was the last stronghold of the enemy in the land of Canaan. Real possession by the Jews had never taken place up until the time of King David, even though the rest of the land had been pretty well conquered. The Jebusites, who lived there, shouted to David, 'Even the blind and the lame could hold you off!' They were very arrogant and proud of their strength. They had dug a tunnel to a nearby spring and had enough of a water supply that they could have stayed shut up in there for years. But some of David's men found a way to get into that shaft, and thus stripped the Jebusites of their pride and position.

Jerusalem was filled with pride again when the Jews built their temple there to worship God. God had told them that his name (but not his total being) would dwell there among his chosen people. The Jews took this to mean that they could live anyway that they wanted to, and yet because of the temple, God would never allow Jerusalem to be destroyed. They felt that because God had chosen them, they were much better than anyone else. And so, because of their wickedness, the Empire of Babylonia came to surround the walls and demand surrender. The Jew's hunger was so great that some began to eat even their own children. Finally the Babylonians broke the walls down and destroyed the city.

Then there is the fortress called Masada, which you won't find mentioned in the Bible. But in about A.D. 70, after Jerusalem had been destroyed again, this time by the Roman armies, a small group of rebels held out in that fortress high upon a huge, steep mountain overlooking the Dead Sea. These men, with no hope of victory whatsoever, committed suicide rather than surrender.

I have mentioned these as a few examples of man's need for fortresses, and we will return to them later. One basic principle that I think that we can see here, though, is that earthly fortresses always fall. Where are all of the great strongholds of Babylon, Ninevah, Rome, or even Hitler's Germany? Fallen! Where will the mighty fortresses of today be after another 2000 years? We have to build a different kind of fortress, for those built of stone can never last for long. And it is not just stone that we try to build them with, for we try to surround ourselves with money, or

prestige, or drugs, or sex, or the gratification of any of our own desires. We all try to shield ourselves from reality, but our walls 'keep tumblin' down'. The point is clear that, just like Jericho, Jerusalem, and Masada; a fortress which is built on our own strength cannot survive.

God never promised us ease, but strength. In the 'intellectual' section of the paper the other day, the cartoon character Tank McNamara witnessed a defense shield for a football player which totally destroyed the would-be tackler. Our defense will not be like that. The fortress that we need is in our mind; a fortress that no mere physical calamity can breach, a stronghold which allows no fear whatsoever! Martin Luther wrote a great spiritual song with the theme: 'A Mighty Fortress is our God', and this is what we need to consider. We need to build a Fortress of Faith, for God has promised to live in us as we live for him.

Faith can give us the strength and direction that we need to fortify our lives. I'm sure that you have each read stories of someone who, in the midst of great pain and suffering overcame great obstacles in order to save themselves or someone else. I have always wanted to have that kind of strength, but whenever I hurt myself slightly, I wonder how I ever could. But I think that I know how one can do it. We can each endure great pain when we have some overpowering thought to concentrate on, such as a friend's life or the safety of our nation. There are sometimes pains associated with our lives, and to me, our faith in God is the overpowering thought which can block out our pain. This faith can also help us to appreciate the many pleasures that we receive.

The fortress at Masada which I mentioned a little earlier is a little different from the others in that its defenders were men dedicated to what they believed in. Though their physical fortress failed, the defenders kept the faith, and the Israeli's of today in remembrance sometimes use the battle cry, 'Masada shall never fall' to represent their total dedication to their cause. Indeed, it will always stand firm in their hearts.

The temple at Jerusalem has another lesson in it, and that is that just wearing the name 'Christian' has no value. The Jews thought that just because the name of God rested in the temple that it was their protection, and just because they were the 'chosen people of God', they would never fall. But there must be much, much more than that to the Fortress of Faith, which is built with the dedication of Masada, and with every fiber of our heart and mind and being.

But we must be very careful not to let our fortress become our prison. This is what can happen to us if we trust in the things of the world. When Jerusalem was surrounded, the Jews were, in effect, prisoners. They were just as captive in their 'fortress' as when they were carried off to Babylon. The food shortage, if you remember, was terrible. Any earthly fortress that we build does indeed also imprison us, but not the Fortress of Faith. It reminds me of the story of the eagle that was found and raised in a chicken coop. The eagle thought, quite naturally, that it was a chicken, and tried to scratch around just like one of them. He did this for months, until one of the bigger chickens scared him and he began to flap his wings in fright. The next thing he knew, he was flying. He soared high over the chicken coop and was free. He never wanted to try to be a chicken again. God may not always help us to break down the barriers that surround us, but he will always give us the power to soar above them. We have the choice to be either a chicken or an eagle in our lives. The view is much better from a height. We must dare to fly like the eagle. It is something of a parallel to this that the highest rank in Scouting is the Eagle. It and the God and Country award are really achievements to shoot for.

I don't want to ignore the fact that Jesus Christ is our Savior, who died so that we might live if we obey him. He is right now preparing mansions for us, a house or a fortress if you will, not physical; not made with human hands. And yet this fortress will guard us eternally from sin and trouble.

But the key question for us here today is: What makes up our fortress here on earth? Is it Faith? We need to learn to trust God will all of our hearts. Remember that it doesn't matter what happens to you, but what happens in you.