

The Walls of the Holy City: Setting Appropriate Boundaries

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Scripture ends with an image of the Holy City New Jerusalem, a shining beacon of hope for the future. Perhaps surprisingly, half of the description is about its walls. If you were to describe a modern city, you would describe its parks, its amenities, its neighborhoods, its stores, roads, restaurants, schools, and government. We tend to think about walls as a negative, not a positive.

Yet from an ancient perspective, a city's walls were a primary feature. People lived in cities because of the safety they brought, and before the advent of gunpowder, walls were the best guarantee of safety.

Just as walls are boundaries, so we need to have internal boundaries. Walls protect those within, and they protect the farmland on the outside from encroachment. Boundaries do the same for us: they protect what and who we let in, and what we allow ourselves to go out into the world and do.

The story of Jacob's agreement with Laban is a wonderful illustration of the proper use of walls or boundaries. Jacob had run away from Laban and Laban pursued him. They met and made peace. As part of that pact, they set up a pillar and Laban said to Jacob, "This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm." That is a wonderful principle: I will not cross this boundary for the purpose of harm.

The boundaries we set involve the actions and words we allow from others, or that we allow ourselves. But more importantly they involve the boundaries we let for the evil spirits--what feelings and thoughts we let in.

The walls of the city stand for the literal teachings in the Word (*AR* 898). Our main spiritual boundaries are not hard to understand: deep principles, but are simple, clear ideas that we can all agree on. They are the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule and the like. The reality is that each of us have walls that are partly built and areas that are actually rubble on the ground. Each of us slowly builds those walls as we commit to following the Lord. In each area of struggle, we learn over time to keep all aspects of that evil outside. We don't even have a conversation with them at the gates.

But there is a further step. While obeying the Ten Commandments is good, rules are not in themselves beautiful. Yet the Holy City was beautiful. Those rules become beautiful when we see the love within them, when we have both boundaries and compassion present within us at the same time.

Real life takes place within the walls. Peace and happiness are inside. And they can flourish when we use the Lord's truth to contain what we let in and what we let ourselves go out to do. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain." (Psalm 127:1-2)

Lessons: Revelation 21:10-21, Genesis 31:43-54, *Apocalypse Revealed* 898