

Truth for Today

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Spiritual Things: A Spiritual House

This morning we come to the last of our present series on 'Spiritual Things'. Our subject is, 'A spiritual house'. It is the Apostle Peter who uses this expression in the second chapter of his first letter: *"You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:5).

He then quotes from three Old Testament passages to establish Christ as the chief cornerstone of this spiritual house. The first one (in 1 Peter 2:6) is from Isaiah 28:16: *"Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame."* The second (1 Peter 2:7) is Psalm 118:22: *"The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone"*, and the final quotation (1 Peter 2:8) is from Isaiah 8:14: *"A stone of stumbling and a rock of offence."*

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, describes the same house as a *"holy temple"*, but still with Christ as its chief cornerstone: *"Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit"* (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Before looking at these two descriptions in more detail it is important to retrace the concept of a house built on earth in which an eternal God could dwell.

From the beginning of Genesis God makes clear that He created man to have fellowship with Him. This fellowship is described in His relationships with men like Adam (see Genesis 2:19-5:5), Abel (Genesis 4:1-25, Hebrews 11:4), Enoch (Genesis 4:17-5:24, Hebrews 11:5) and Noah (Genesis 5:29-9:29, Hebrews 11:7). After the flood (Genesis 6-9), this fellowship continues with the patriarchs Abraham (Genesis 12-25), Isaac (Genesis 21-35) and Jacob (Genesis 25-49). But it is not until God redeems the Children of Israel from Egypt and leads them into the wilderness (Exodus 15) that He gives instructions for a place to be built where He could dwell amongst His people: *"Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering. And this is the offering which you shall take from them: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and scarlet thread, fine linen, and goats' hair; ram skins dyed red, badger skins, and acacia wood; oil for the light, and spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones, and stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate. And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it"* (Exodus 25:1-9).

It has always impressed me that God takes two chapters of the Bible to describe creation (Genesis 1:1-2:7), yet takes the greater part of Exodus 25-40 to describe the tabernacle in which He would dwell amongst His earthly people. I think this describes how important it is to God to provide a means by which He could be with His people.

When the tabernacle is finally finished we read that, *"Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle"* (Exodus 40:33-35).

Tabernacle means a 'dwelling place'. It was built to the specifications which God Himself gave to Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 26:1-37). It was the only house God recognised until David had the vision to build a temple. Although David organised the materials (1 Chronicles 22:1-19), it was Solomon who built the first temple (1 Kings 6:1-38) on the temple mount known as Mount Zion (1 Kings 8:1). Although the exact location of this first temple is unknown, it is believed to be the site where the Dome of the Rock is situated today.

When the Temple was completed and Solomon finished his prayer of dedication in 2 Chronicles 7 we read, *"When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD'S house"* (2 Chronicles 7:1-2).

When the glory of God comes down to dwell, and fills both the Tabernacle and the First Temple, we are left with the sense of neither house being able to contain the presence of God: also the sense that there was always a distance between the presence of God and His people.

Ultimately the glory of God leaves the Tabernacle. This is indicated by the birth of Ichabod whose name meant "the glory has departed" as we see in 1 Samuel 4:19-22. Similarly the glory of the LORD leaves the Temple in Ezekiel 10:18.

Solomon's temple was destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians. Cyrus the Great of Persia later ordered the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Ezra 6:3-12) and the construction of the Second Temple, which was completed in the reign of Darius the Great around 518 BC and consecrated in 516 BC.

This Second Temple was looted, its religious services stopped and Judaism effectively outlawed in 167 BC when Antiochus IV Epiphanes erected an altar to Zeus in the Temple and pigs were sacrificed on that altar. The Second Temple was replaced by the more magnificent temple Herod built, the one referred to in the New Testament (see John 2:20). The Romans under Titus destroyed this during the Siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

In John's Gospel Jesus refers to the Temple as His Father's house: *"Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, 'Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!'"* (John 2:13-16).

But Jesus also introduces the thought of His body being a temple: *"So the Jews answered and said to Him, 'What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' Then the Jews said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?' But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said"* (John 2:18-22).

In John 4 Jesus introduces the teaching that the worship of God is no longer being centred on a physical building: *"The woman said to Him, 'Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth'"* (John 4:19-24).

In the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul preaches in Athens, he also explains that God does not dwell in temples made with hands: *"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands"* (Acts 17:24).

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked His disciples vital questions about Himself: *"When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, 'Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?' So they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"* (Matthew 16:13-15).

It was Simon Peter who answered, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:16). In response Jesus said to Peter, *"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16:17-18).

Here Jesus promises to build His church and He is the person on whom it is built - the chief cornerstone (see Ephesians 2:20). The cornerstone (or foundation stone) was originally the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation. It was of vital importance since all other stones were set in reference to this stone. It determined the vertical and horizontal position of the entire building.

In regards to Solomon's temple we read in 1 Kings 6:7: *And the temple, when it was being built, was built with stone finished at the quarry, so that no hammer or chisel or any iron tool was heard in the temple while it was being built. This is a remarkable illustration in two ways. When we think of the work of Christ at Calvary and the sufferings it involved, we read in Matthew 27:59-60 that, "When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,*

and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb..."

It is out of this tomb of newly hewn rock that Jesus emerges in all the power of resurrection as the living cornerstone of His soon-to-be built church. The process of shaping temple rocks before they were put into the building is also an illustration of the work of God in us, so that we fit perfectly into Christ's glorious church: *"Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish"* (Ephesians 5:25-27).

We come to Christ, as Peter describes in 1 Peter 2:4, to be built upon Him as the living cornerstone. Jesus is described as the One who was rejected by men but chosen by God. He is also described as precious or costly.

The Apostle Peter describes the cost of our salvation: *"knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot"* (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The tabernacle and temples which followed were incredibly expensive. Even today we could not afford to rebuild the beautiful and ornate cathedrals we find in Christendom. Their cost was immense, but we will never fully know the cost of our salvation. Only the Godhead understands the full cost of the sacrifice of Christ.

It is upon this costly foundation that the spiritual house is being built. The people who make up this spiritual house are also described as holy priests who render service to God. The role of the holy priesthood is to offer spiritual sacrifices.

In 1 Peter 2:5 "spiritual sacrifices" is a general term embracing a variety of sacrifices. These include:

1. **Offering our lives as a living sacrifice:** *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service"* (Romans 12:1).
2. **Sacrifice emerging from faith:** *"Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all"* (Philippians 2:17).

An example of this sacrifice, given in the same epistle, is the things the Church at Philippi sent to support Paul in his service: *"I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God"* (Philippians 4:18).

3. **The sacrifice of praise:** *"Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name"* (Hebrews 13:15).

Peter also introduces a further aspect of the priesthood serving in the spiritual house - that of the royal priesthood. In addition, he describes members of the spiritual house as a holy nation and a special people: *"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy"* (1 Peter 2:9-10).

In 1 Peter 2:9-10 Peter extends the priestly services to include the responsibility we have to witness to the Saviour as those who have been called out of darkness into light, who have been made the people of God and who have obtained mercy. This witness is about light, life and love. We were in darkness but the Light of World has shone in our hearts. We were dead in trespasses and sins and without God and hope in this world (see Ephesians 2:5): now we are the people of God (1 Peter 2: 10). We were in great need and God demonstrated the richness of His mercy to us. This is a wonderful message to proclaim to today's world.

Paul also writes along the same lines as Peter in Ephesians 2:19-22. He explains we are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the spiritual household of God. Paul also introduces the ministry of the apostles and prophets of the New Testament. This ministry is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ whom he also describes as the chief cornerstone. On this chief cornerstone the whole church of Christ is constructed. Paul, like Peter, adds that the construction is a spiritual one made up of true believers who are fitted together and grow into a holy temple in the Lord. We are built into Christ to form a dwelling place, or tabernacle, for God in the Spirit.

In Ephesians 4 Paul links the building of the church to Christ's ascension: *"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive,*

and gave gifts to men.’ (Now this, ‘He ascended’ - what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)” (Ephesians 4:7-10).

In John’s Gospel, Christ’s glorious ascension is linked to the sending of the Holy Spirit: *“On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37-39).*

In Ephesians 4 Paul also links the ascension to the provision of apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers for the building up of the body of Christ, His church and God’s spiritual house: *“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).*

The work of edification or building up is so that the people of God will grow in harmony and mutual blessing to spiritual maturity. This creates not only strong individual disciples but also a body of believers, witnessing to the grace of God by its characteristic love and unity: *“that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:14-16).*

The church described as a spiritual house and as a dwelling place for God by the Spirit connects with Revelation 21. In Revelation 21 John sees a new heaven and new earth and the New Jerusalem. In Revelation 21:3 a voice announces that the tabernacle of God is now with man and God will dwell with them. Every suffering caused by sin is removed and all things are made new: *“And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’ Then He who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ And He said to me, ‘Write, for these words are true and faithful” (Revelation 21:3-5).*

Revelation 21 is about a future day. Right here and now we have the privilege of being members of God’s spiritual house and being characterised by two vital features described by the Lord Jesus: love and unity. *“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). “That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:21).*

As we meet together this morning as members of God’s spiritual house may our love and unity present Jesus Christ.

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