

The Real Temple

Grace, mercy and peace to you through God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. One day almost two thousand years ago heaven and earth met at a single point: the cross. All time and space were centered on that point. Heaven was silent before the awful spectacle of the son of God dying. Angels awaited the outcome of the struggle. Rocks exploded with the tension. The sun hid its face from the dreadful scene. Graves could not contain their dead. The son of God was suspended between earth and heaven, bearing the sin of man and suffering the agonies of hell—all compressed into six hours. This is the story that gives meaning to all other stories. This is the story of how salvation was won for mankind.

In Christ Jesus, dear friends. The first house of worship God gave to his people was the tabernacle—the portable house of God. The Israelites built the tabernacle according to God's specific directions. In the courtyard of the tabernacle he accepted their sacrifices which atoned for their sins and in the tabernacle they offered up prayers and petitions which he promised to honor. When the Israelites gathered for worship in the tabernacle, God would come in smoke and fire and fill the tabernacle with his presence. He would lead them with pillars of smoke by day and pillars of fire by night. For forty years they traveled with God and worshipped him in his tabernacle. The tabernacle was Israel's church from the time of Moses to the time of David.

The next house of worship God gave to his people was the temple in Jerusalem which was built by Solomon, the son of David. Described in great detail in the Books of Kings and Chronicles, Solomon's temple was one of the marvels of the ancient world. It was a magnificent structure made of stone and cedar whose walls and furnishings were overlaid with gold and silver. In the courtyard of the temple sacrifices continued to be offered up to atone for the sins of the Israelites and in the temple the priests offered up prayers for the protection and prosperity of Israel.

Later in his life, however, Solomon turned away from worshipping God and allowed pagan religion to spread in Israel. And as the Israelites were drawn more and more to pagan worship, God withdrew his blessings and protection. The social fabric unraveled and when Solomon died, civil war erupted and Israel split into two kingdoms: a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. Over the next three centuries, the kings that ruled in both kingdoms were mostly evil kings who followed the pagan ways of Solomon and with a few notable exceptions like Hezekiah; they encouraged the people to worship pagan gods. In the northern kingdom King Jeroboam set up pagan shrines and in the southern kingdom, priests defiled the Jerusalem temple with pagan images and rituals. As a result, God finally abandoned both kingdoms: he abandoned the northern kingdom to the Assyrians who conquered the Israelites in 726 B.C. and he abandoned the southern kingdom to the Babylonians who invaded and conquered them in 586 B.C. They sacked Jerusalem, slaughtered most of the people, tore down the temple and hauled away the remaining citizens to Babylon as prisoners of war. This was an unmitigated disaster for the Israelites who never imagined that God would allow his people to be conquered or his temple to be destroyed. But without God, Israel was just another country and the Jerusalem temple was just another building. A building which had been turned into a pagan shrine and was no longer a temple of God.

But later, God raised up his temple again among the Israelites. First Zerubbabel and then Herod restored it and it was once again a marvel to behold. On one occasion when Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples pointed to it and said, "Look, teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" But Jesus replied, "Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." And so it came to pass. Forty years later the Romans came, tore down the temple again. It was never rebuilt and on the temple mount where it stood there now stands a structure called the "Dome of the Rock"—an Islamic mosque.

Once again, God's temple had been destroyed. Or had it? When Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple, the Jews demanded that he give them a sign to prove that he had the authority to do so. He answered them, "destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days." Understandably, the Jews were deeply skeptical. "It has taken forty six years to build this temple," they said, "and you are going to raise it up in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. Jesus himself was the real temple of God. Now that was hard for them to accept—or even understand. It's a little hard for us to accept and understand as well. How can the body of a man be a temple?

Before we answer that question, we first need to ask: what exactly **is** God's temple? What takes place in God's temple? And the answer is that God's temple is the place where heaven and earth meet and where sinful man and a righteous God can be reconciled. In the tabernacle and the temple the Israelites were reconciled to Yahweh through the sacrifices of animals which he allowed to atone for their sins. In Jesus Christ, all men are reconciled to God through the sacrifice of his body on the cross which atoned for their sins. In the Old Testament the sins of the Israelites were atoned for by the blood of lambs. At the cross of Calvary, the sins of all mankind were atoned for by the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Each year—on Yom Caphar—the sins of Israelites which had not been confessed and forgiven were laid on the head of a scapegoat which would bear them away into the wilderness and die with them there. Jesus our divine scapegoat bore our sins on the cross and died with them there.

Jesus is the true temple. But that temple, like the others, had to be brought down so that the church, the new body of Christ in this world, could be raised up as the place where sinful man and a righteous God meet and are reconciled through the forgiveness of sins. But one day this temple too will be brought down. The bible makes it clear that as time goes on; the church of God will be increasingly persecuted and attacked and will finally fall. The voice of the gospel will be silenced. But God will raise it up again when this world passes away and he replaces it with a new heavens and a new earth, and we will all dwell in the New Jerusalem of God, a city not made with human hands. Meanwhile, we abide in the body of Christ on earth, the church, and we take our encouragement and our joy in the words our Savior spoke to his disciples the night before he was crucified: "in a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me. I tell you the truth; you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your

joy!" The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.