

JESUS THE TEMPLE OF GOD

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Believers who thoughtfully read their Bibles will recall Jesus' insistence that he himself is the temple of God. 'Destroy this temple', he said, 'and I will raise it again in three days' (John 2:19). John carefully explains that 'the temple had spoken of was his body' - though John is the first to acknowledge that none of the disciples, let alone those who were questioning him, understood what he was saying at the time (John 2:21-22).

To grasp something of the glorious audacity of the claim, and to perceive what bearing it has upon believers who gather for worship today, we must fasten on certain turning points in the history of redemption. We cannot list all of them; nevertheless, Jesus' claim will prove almost incoherent to us unless we meditate on some of them.

We must begin with the tabernacle. At the time of the giving of the law, Moses was given precise instructions on the tabernacle's design, construction, function, and purpose. Even the details of its utensils are specified: 'See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain', God insists (Exodus 25:40) - and then not only is the point reiterated, but the fact that Moses and his workers follow the pattern in its minutest point is repeatedly underscored (e.g. Exodus 26:30; 27:8; 30:11; 36:1; 39:1ff.).

The preliminary 'tent of meeting', used before the tabernacle was built, was the place where God appeared *in glory* to Moses, a glory so intense that it made Moses' face shine (Exodus 33). It was in this period that Moses, still in anguish over the sins of the people in the episode of the golden calf, cried to God, 'Now show me your *glory*' (Exodus 33:18). The LORD graciously replied, 'I will cause all my *goodness* to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But . . . you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live' (33:19-20).

Eventually the tabernacle was built according to plan, 'and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the [new] Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle' (Exodus 40:34-35).

Once the people settled in the land, the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire were no longer needed to lead the people on their way. Nevertheless, the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place once a year, sprinkling the prescribed blood on the top of the ark of the covenant, located between the two cherubim, the place where the LORD manifested himself in glory. This was ritual, of course, ritual that continued during the long life of the first temple; but it was more than ritual. It was the meeting place between God and his people, mediated through a priest appointed by God, a priest who approached God, on his own behalf and on behalf of the people, representing them before the Glory.

Of course, spiritually minded people recognized that God could never be limited by the temple. Solomon made the point explicit at the temple's dedication: 'But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!' (1 Kings 8:27). Nevertheless, the tabernacle and then the temple served as the focal point of Israelite worship, of the priestly service, of the sacrificial system, of the choirs of praise, and, above all, of God's gracious self-disclosure to his covenant people.

That, at least, was what God had prescribed. In reality, the ideal was rapidly and repeatedly compromised. Solomon himself built pagan temples in Jerusalem. At one point in Israel's history, religion faithful to the covenant given by God and mediated by Moses had sunk so low that it took a thorough search of the temple and the rubbish that had accumulated there to find a copy of the Book of the Law (1 Kings 22:8). Eventually the cycles of degeneration sank so low that God determined to send his people into captivity and to destroy Jerusalem utterly. Preparatory to that horror, the glory of the LORD departed from the temple, the most dreadful sign of impending judgment (Ezekiel 10). Nor is there any record of the return of the glory of the LORD when a modest temple was put up after the return of a remnant of Israelites after the Exile. The Glory had departed.

The centuries unfolded, and still the Glory was hidden. In the fulness of time, God sent his Son. In an extraordinary act of revelation, Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). 'As he was praying,

the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning' (Luke 9:29), and his 'face shone like the sun' (Matthew 17:2). The appearance of Moses and Elijah with him served only to focus attention on *him*: they spoke of his 'exodus'. However misguided Peter's suggestion that the disciples build three shelters, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, the voice from heaven spared none of his feelings: '*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!*' (Matthew 17:5). The glory had appeared once again, shining in splendour, but this time not in a temple, but in a man.

The way this fundamental truth is worked out in the pages of the new covenant Scriptures varies from book to book. For example, in John's Gospel, the prologue (1:1-18) records the evangelist's witness: 'The Word became flesh and [lit.] tabernacled among us. *We have seen his glory*' (1:14). True, 'No one has ever seen God' (1:18), as Moses himself was earlier instructed; but this Word, this 'God the One and Only who is at the Father's side' (1:18), he 'has made him known' (1:18). In this Gospel, the Jesus who insists he himself is the ultimate temple (John 2) makes it clear that with the dawning of the new covenant era the question of geography, of where some temple or holy place has been located, is obsolete (John 4:21ff.). The time is dawning, Jesus insists, when debates about whether it is better to worship God on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim or at the temple in Jerusalem would forever be superseded by the presence of the promised Messiah (4:26), one of whose functions is to explain these things (4:25).

The Epistle to the Hebrews devotes parts of three long chapters (8:1-10:18) to unpacking these themes. God's dramatic insistence that everything be built according to the pattern revealed to Moses is shown to have a purpose (8:5): it guaranteed that the old covenant tabernacle and temple patterns would serve as an appropriate copy and shadow of the realities that were still to be revealed (re-read Hebrews 8:1-10:18 with this in mind). Hebrews draws attention to the many carefully prescribed details that showed the old covenant stipulations were temporary, however important; the reality was bound up with Christ and his cross-work. 'Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover' (9:5), we are reminded - though the ultimate 'Most Holy Place' was not in the tabernacle or the temple (9:8) but was nothing other than the very presence of God, before whom Christ, through the eternal Spirit, offered himself unblemished, that his blood might cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God (9:11-14).

The closing two chapters of the Bible take this line of thought one step farther. The new Jerusalem is built like a cube (Revelation 21:16), and the only biblical 'cube' is the Most Holy Place, whose dimensions were prescribed by God. In other words, this is another way of saying that there is no temple in the new Jerusalem (21:22): the whole place is the Most Holy Place, constantly placing its blessed citizens in the presence of the unshielded glory of God - or, otherwise put, there is no temple in the city 'because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple' (21:22).

A host of implications follows hard on these observations from the course of God's progressively disclosed plan of redemption. Space allows me to mention but a few of them, each one bound up with Christian worship. (1) Christian worship, unlike that of the old covenant, is not essentially bound up with location, priests, sacrifices, or ritual. It is bound up with him to whom those God-given institutions pointed: Jesus Christ and his work on our behalf. (2) In the New Testament, a great deal of Christian 'worship' and 'sacrifice' language is tied to consistent Christian living (e.g. Romans 2:1-2). In other words, it is inappropriate for Christians to think that their 'worship' is properly restricted to 'worship services' at 11:00 a.m. Sunday morning. This is as inappropriate as thinking that worship demands human priests, or some sacrifice other than Christ's sacrifice, or prescribed ritual, to bring us to God. (3) When we come together for *corporate* worship (whether Sunday morning or any other time), we are together and in a focused way engaging in what should be the pattern of our lives at all times: thankfully ascribing praise to our Maker and Redeemer, rejoicing to live under his care and his command, eager to commune with him and understand and obey his Word. (4) All of this, and much more, is secured for us by the Lord Christ, whose atoning work brought us rebels into the Most Holy Place, into the very presence of God. (5) Some of the fruit of his work is still promise: our worship, individually and corporately, is in joyful anticipation of the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem, where there will no temple, but where we shall delight in the unshielded radiance of the glory of the Lord God Almighty and of the Lamb.