

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. George Stevens

Tabernacle - Hebrews 9:11; Temple - Acts 7:48

In our last talk, we found that there was a circumcision and a house that were both made without hands. That is to say, they were not man-made but, rather, made by God. Today, we will consider a tabernacle and temples that are also made by God.

Have you ever seen infants at play using a sheet and a couple of chairs to build a tent? I'm sure you have. Their resourcefulness and imagination is a wonder to behold even at such an early age. Think then about the resourcefulness of God. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, He gave to Moses the design for a special tent called the tabernacle. God's purpose was to live among His people Israel, but the tent of dwelling had to be according to His own design. Nonetheless, the materials for this structure were provided whole-heartedly by the children of Israel. The presence of God in the tabernacle was seen by a cloud that rested upon it. When the cloud moved, then the whole camp of Israel moved along with it. In this way, God guided the people.

The tabernacle also provided an approach to God. Originally, God had intended that the whole nation of Israel should have been priests. However, Israel failed to come up to God's standard, so only the tribe of Levi was selected to take on the work of the tabernacle with Aaron and his sons chosen to represent the people in the priestly office.

Hebrews chapter 9 broadly outlines this tabernacle, but immediately contrasts it with another: "Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary. For there was a tabernacle made; the first wherein was the candlestick, and the table, and the shewbread; which is called the sanctuary. And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all; Which had the golden censer, and the Ark of the Covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercy seat; of which we cannot now speak particularly. Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost thus signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation. **But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.** For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

The writer of the book of Hebrews speaks of the tabernacle that was built hundreds of years beforehand. It comprised a tent with two compartments. Each compartment had a curtain at its entrance. The first acted as a door into the holy place where the priests served God. The second was called the veil and led into the holy of holies where only the high priest was allowed to enter once a year with the burning incense and the blood of an atoning sacrifice.

If we examine the passages referring to the furniture of the tabernacle in the book of Exodus, we find two specific orders given. In chapter 25 the Lord begins in the holiest of all by describing the ark and the mercy seat. He then moves out to the holy place and outlines details of the table of shewbread and the lampstand. The actual structure of the tent is dealt with in chapter 26 before we find instructions for making a brazen altar to go into the court area of the tabernacle. This is completed in Exodus 27: 19. In chapters 28 and 29, we find that Aaron and his sons are called and made suitable for the service of the tabernacle. Finally, that which is needed for men to approach God is given in chapter 30 and includes the altar of incense that was to stand in the holy place and the brazen laver that was set up in the court.

In contrast, we have read that Christ has become a high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands. This is clarified by Hebrews 9:24: "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for

us.” Here we see that God’s design for the first tabernacle was a representation or type of the true tabernacle to come. That which the first tabernacle represented in a material form is now with us in its real form because Christ is our great high priest. It seems then, that the parallel to the old “holiest of all” is heaven itself which is the place in which God chooses to dwell - even though the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Him (compare 2 Chronicles 6:18 and 30).

This is confirmed by Hebrews 8:1-2: “Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum; We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man.”

The “throne of the Majesty in the heavens” was once represented by the mercy seat in the first tabernacle. This was where God “dwelt”. Justice and judgment were the habitation of His throne. The cherubim were grasped by that throne and all it stood for. They were the guardians of that throne and the ones who executed the judgment of God. However, when the blood of the atoning sacrifice was sprinkled upon that throne, justice was changed to grace and judgment was turned to mercy. This is where we are today. What was done symbolically in that day by the high priest annually, the burning incense and the blood, has been accomplished by the perfections of the sufferings of Christ and His blood in our day once and for all. The main difference is that Aaron did this for the people of Israel, but Christ has done it for everyone. Christ Jesus has been set forth as a mercy seat (propitiation) through faith in His blood (Romans 3:25).

Again, we read for our assurance: “Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

Furthermore, Hebrews 4:14-16 tell us that Jesus has entered into the holiest as our forerunner having been made an high priest after the order of Mechisedec. The Lord Jesus is both a king and a priest fulfilling the prophecy found in Zechariah 6:12-13: “And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.”

We need to take time to sit back and meditate upon these facts. They are absolutely amazing! Christ has, by the eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God. The worth of that sacrifice is seen in the effects of His precious blood. It is so valued in the sight of God that it enables Him to approach men with mercy. Also, it is by that blood that our consciences are cleansed from dead works so that we may serve the living God.

We serve Him as members of a holy and royal priesthood. Yes! All true Christians have a priestly service to fulfil. Firstly, 1 Peter 2 tells us we are a holy priesthood responsible to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God. These are only acceptable to God through Christ. We have a further example of this in Hebrews 13:15: “By him (Jesus) therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.”

Peter then goes on to write that we are royal priests who should display the virtues of God (1 Peter 2:9). We are exhorted in Hebrews 13:16 to remember to do good and to communicate. We “do good” whenever any of our work brings glory to God. Self is absent. “To communicate” means to put what we have for the use of others. This is seen in the early Christians where all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need (Acts 2:44-45). With such sacrifices, God is well pleased! What a challenge!

We can also see aspects of priestly service foreshadowed in the first tabernacle. First there was a true apprehension of the moral virtues of Christ seen in the fragrance of the burning incense in the golden censer that the high priest placed in the holiest before sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice. So we Christians today should be active witnesses before God and people of the moral glories of our Lord Jesus Christ and the preciousness of His redeeming blood.

If the golden altar reminds us of Christ’s intercession for us, how important it is for us to be found praying for all men (1 Timothy 2:1) and, particularly, for our fellow Christians.

The lampstand of pure gold in the first tabernacle, with a design based on the almond tree, typifies Christ as the Word - compare John 1:1-3 with Jeremiah 1:11-12. He was the eternal Word who existed before the first beginning. He was a distinct person, face to face with God. Yet He was God! He always existed as such. He was the Maker of all things. Life resided in Him. Therefore, just as the priests had to maintain those lamps so that they continually shone their light on the lampstand, so Christians, by the Spirit’s power, are to maintain a witness to the wonder of Christ’s person as the Word.

The table of shewbread housed the loaves of shewbread. Shewbread is the “bread of God’s presence”. It reminds us of the descriptions of Christ in John chapter 6. Christ is the “true bread” given into this world by the Father. He is the “bread of God” who came down from heaven and gives life to the world. He is the “bread of life” who is able to sustain all who believe in Him. This bread was used as food for Aaron and his sons. So Christ is the spiritual food of believers today. If we seek Christ in all the Scriptures, then we will grow to be spiritually strong and more like Him day by day. This is God’s desire!

On the other hand, the bread represented the twelve tribes of Israel. Israel was God’s special people. They were favoured by God. Today, Christians are God’s special people. They are accepted in His Beloved One, his own Son. As such, God sees them in all the virtues of His Son. Hence, the Father loves them as He loves His own Son (John 17:23). Amazing grace!

Next, we come to the second part of our talk today - temples made without hands. In Acts 7:47-50, we read: “But Solomon built him an house. Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things?”

The Lord argues here that the heaven is one of the things that He has created therefore it cannot really be His dwelling place because it cannot contain Him. Yet it was there that He set His throne. It was His sovereign choice to dwell in and rule from heaven. Yet here is a wonder, the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in the Son of the Father’s love (Colossians 1:19) and also bodily (Colossians 2:9). The totality of God’s nature, attributes, powers and glories permanently abide in the Son of God who is now at the right hand of God. Upon His entry into the world a body was prepared for Him. That body was the temple of the Holy Spirit of God (John 2:19-21). So the first temple found made without hands in the New Testament was the physical body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are three other passages in the New Testament referring to temples made without hands. Firstly, there is the local assembly (or church) in Corinth: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

It was the Apostle Paul who had been the means of the conversion of the Corinthians, and the setting up of an assembly in Corinth. It was with this in mind that he refers to himself as a “wise masterbuilder” (1 Corinthians 3:10). As such he had laid a good foundation. Now there was a need for correction among the Corinthian saints, so he writes, “But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.” The importance is stressed of the kind of materials built upon the foundation. Were they building with durable materials which would stand the test of the fire, such as gold, silver and precious stones, or with wood, hay and stubble which would be burned up? The apostle speaks of a day when all will be assessed at its true value. “Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is” (1 Corinthians 3:13).

There is the encouragement of a reward given for that which abides, while as to that which is burned up there is loss. Nevertheless it does say of such, “but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15). Paul is writing to Christians here. It is a solemn consideration for us in our day, in our local gatherings, as to what sort of work we are doing for the building up of fellow believers.

In verse 16 of our chapter there was that which the Corinthians were to know, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” Here, the word “ye” refers to the whole group of believers at Corinth. Together they are stated to be the inner sanctuary of God with the Spirit of God dwelling in them. The verse indicates, at the same time, the fact that the Holy Spirit is God. But why does the apostle Paul remind them of this? Because their assembly was supposed to display the attributes of God in its conduct, communication and service. How severe the apostle is upon any person who would dare to corrupt the temple of God. As both Judge and Executioner, God Himself would deal with him or her.

The manner in which the verse is phrased suggests that false teachers may have been trying to gain entry into that assembly in order to sway men towards their own traditions. It is unlikely that these people were genuine Christians although they might profess to be. Nonetheless, if we know that the church we go to is seen by God as His temple it would surely promote the fruit of the Spirit within it (Galatians 5:22). So, let us search our hearts with regard to the matter of encouraging, strengthening and building up the believers in our local church.

Secondly, the body of each individual believer is called the temple of the Holy Ghost in 1 Corinthians 6:19. Ephesians 1:13 tells Christians that when they had trusted in Christ, then they were sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise. When the works of the assembly were in doubt, Paul reminded the Christians that the whole group was the temple of God. Here, in this passage, we read: “Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body” (1

Corinthians 6:13). So where the purity of the body is in question, he reminds individuals of their responsibility by telling them that their bodies are temples.

The portion goes on to tell us that we are to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and use our bodies in His service. In doing so we may be sure of His grace and support, as Paul says, "And the Lord for the body." Since the believer's body is indwelt by the Holy Spirit how grave it would be to use it for unholy practices. The apostle goes on to say, "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (verse 20). We are all well aware that the great price referred to is the precious blood of Christ. What a claim this has upon our lives! In addition, when he says, "Glorify God in your body" we may well revert to the thought that display is connected with the truth of the temple.

Finally, Ephesians 2:21-22 tell us of all Christians being formed into a body: "In whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:21-22).

Here the apostle is writing about the formation on earth of the one body of Christ. It is composed of Christians from amongst both Jews and Gentiles. The middle wall of partition that had separated them had been removed. Both were reconciled to God in one body by the cross. The animosity between them had been done away in that sacrifice.

As he closes the chapter, he moves from the truth of the body of Christ to that of the building. "And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone" (verse 20). These are New Testament apostles and prophets. The truth about Christ and His church was made known to them by revelation from Christ in heaven, and passed on to the saints in the power of the Holy Spirit. All is held firmly together by the chief corner stone, Jesus Christ Himself. This building, because it is vital and living, is growing, "unto an holy temple in the Lord." This looks on to the future when the church is complete and the day of display will have arrived, perhaps as described in Revelation 21. It will then be the city of administration, "Having the glory of God." In the present time the church abides as the habitation of God through the Spirit. May God give us the grace to behave ourselves according to the wonder of these truths.

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