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THE TEMPLE AND HEAVEN

At Mt. Sinai God gave the children of Israel the description of the portable tent (Tabernacle) that He wanted them to make, using precious cloth and valuable animal skins (Exodus chapters 25 and 26).

The Tabernacle was to have two sections in it, separated by a veil. That part of the Tabernacle nearer to the entrance was to be furnished with a set of candlesticks, a table, and an incense altar. This was to be the “Holy Place.” The second part of the tent was to have a gold-covered box in it, which was called the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:22). This part of the tent was to be the “Most Holy Place” (Exodus 26:33). The purpose of the tent was to provide God with a place in which He could dwell among the children of Israel (Exodus 25:8).

Outside the tent, there was to be a courtyard where animals could be offered upon an altar (Exodus chapter 27). In the courtyard a giant basin was to be placed, in which the utensils that were used at the temple could be washed (Exodus 30:17-21).

The children of Israel constructed the tent exactly as God showed them at Mt. Sinai. Around the tent and its courtyard, they constructed a fence. God told the children of Israel where and when to set up the tent and when to move it. The tent and its environs were the center of public worship among the children of Israel.

KING SOLOMON’S TEMPLE

When David became king over all Israel, he built a fine palace for himself in Jerusalem. After his palace was finished, it distressed him that God was, so to speak, still living in a tent. So David said to Nathan the prophet,

“Here I am, living in a palace of cedar,

while the ark of God remains in a tent.”

2 Samuel 7:2 NIV

Please notice that it was not God’s idea for the children of Israel to build a temple; it was David’s idea. So God said to David,

“Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites,
did I ever say to any of their rulers
whom I commanded
to shepherd my people Israel,

‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’”

2 Samuel 7:7 NIV

In spite of the fact that it was not God’s idea, God allowed a temple to be built in Jerusalem, but He did not allow David to build it, for David had been a man of war. He allowed David’s son Solomon to build it (2 Samuel 7:12-13).

Solomon built the temple after the pattern of the Tabernacle, which had a Holy Place and a Most Holy Place, and he surrounded the temple with a courtyard and connected buildings.

Any Israelite could go into the courtyard, but only priests were permitted to go into the temple itself; and only the high priest was permitted to go into the Most Holy Place, and that only once a year (Leviticus 16:32-34). The high priest went into the Most Holy Place to meet God and to offer the blood of an animal as atonement for the sins of the people.

Solomon’s temple was a magnificent building. It was dedicated with great pomp and ceremony. It stood for several hundred years before it was destroyed by the Babylonians in the year 586 BC (2 Kings 25:9).

While Solomon’s temple lay in ruins, the prophet Ezekiel received a vision of a future temple (Ezekiel chapters 40 to 48). The new temple was, as Ezekiel described it, of such grand proportions that it has never been built exactly as Ezekiel described

it. Indeed, there is doubt that it could be built as Ezekiel described it, for Ezekiel's description seems to fit heaven better than it fits any earthly temple that might be built.

THE SECOND TEMPLE

The children of Israel that returned to the land of Canaan from Babylon built a second temple to replace Solomon's temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed. They completed the second temple in the days of Ezra, who first came to Jerusalem from Persia in the year 458 BC. (In order to find a narrative of the building of the second temple, read the book of Ezra 3:7 to Ezra 6:15.) The children of Israel were not rich enough, at that time, to build the temple on as grand a scale as king Solomon had built (Haggai 2:3).

As years passed, the second temple gradually fell into disrepair, and King Herod (73 BC to 4 AD) restored and enlarged it. This is the temple that was standing in Jerusalem in the days of Jesus.

JESUS' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE TEMPLE

Jesus was involved with the temple. His parents took Him there as a baby (Luke 2:22), and as a boy they took Him to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover as often as they could (Luke 2:41). When Jesus was twelve years old, His parents unintentionally left Him behind in Jerusalem; and they, returning, found Him discussing the Scriptures with some of the scholars (Luke 2:42-50).

After Jesus was grown, he referred to the temple as "the house of God" (Matthew 12:4). He was aware that God was present at the temple (Matthew 23:20-21), and He called the temple His "Father's house" (John 2:16). He went there often to teach the people, but He was only on the temple grounds and in its surrounding buildings. He apparently did not go into the temple

building itself, due to the fact that He was of the tribe of Judah and not of the tribe of Levi, from which the priests came.

Twice, His zeal for the temple led Him to chase people away, who were selling animals and exchanging money on the temple grounds (John 2:13-17; Matthew 21:12-13). It cannot, therefore, be maintained that Jesus disrespected the temple. He appreciated its value, yet He knew that the days of the temple were numbered. He foretold that the city of Jerusalem, along with the temple (Matthew 24:2), would be destroyed (Matthew 23:37), and He wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) because of the destruction that He saw coming (Luke 19:42-44).

Although Jesus foresaw the destruction of the temple, He never, so far as we know, encouraged anyone to think about rebuilding it again. Jesus' knew that a new kind of temple was needed.

JESUS POINTED TOWARD A NEW KIND OF TEMPLE

The people who observed Jesus casting the moneychangers off the temple grounds demanded of Him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this" (John 2:18)? Instead of giving them a sign, He referred them to His resurrection, which is the greatest sign of all. He said,

"Destroy this temple,
and I will raise it again in three days."

John 2:19 NIV

The people thought He was speaking about the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem and was saying He would raise again it in three days. So they retorted, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days" (John 2:20)? Jesus was referring, of course, to His own body (John 2:21), which was a temple of the Holy Spirit, who dwelled within Him.

GOD LIVES IN PEOPLE'S HEARTS

Jesus prayed that both He and the Father might take up their residence in His followers. He requested of God in prayer,

“...that all of them may be one,
Father, just as you are in me
and I am in you.
May they also be in us
so that the world may believe
that you have sent me.”

John 17:21 NIV

Jesus' prayer points to a truth that Philip, the first evangelist, made very clear as he spoke to people after Jesus' resurrection. Philip declared that God does not live in houses made by men. He said,

“However,
the Most High does not live
in houses made by men.”

Acts 7:48 NIV

To back up his statement, Philip referred to the words of Isaiah, who quoted God as saying,

““Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord.
'Or where will my resting place be?
Has not my hand made all these things?’”

Acts 7:49-50 (Isaiah 66:1-2) NIV

Isaiah knew that it was incongruous to think that the Creator of the universe should be confined to one particular building on

earth; for God is everywhere. King Solomon said that even the universe cannot contain Him (2 Chronicles 2:6).

The apostle Paul told members of the church in Corinth that they were a temple of God. He said,

“Don’t you know that you yourselves
are God’s temple
and that God’s Spirit lives in you?
If anyone destroys God’s temple,
God will destroy him;
for God’s temple is sacred,
and you are that temple.”

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 NIV

It is obvious that the apostle Paul was not referring to a physical building as “God’s temple.” He was referring to members of the church. He maintained that their bodies are temples. He said,

“Do you not know that your body
is a temple of the Holy Spirit,
who is in you,
whom you have received from God?
You are not your own;
you were bought at a price.
Therefore honor God with your body.”

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NIV

THE CHURCH IS A TEMPLE

The church is not limited to any particular place. It extends around the world and across the centuries. It is a spiritual building. All faithful followers of Jesus that have died are in it. This temple that is being built one stone at a time as people come to believe in Jesus, confess their faith in Him, repent of their sins, and obey Him

in baptism. After people experience these things, God sends His Holy Spirit to live in them (Acts 2:38-39). The apostle Paul, speaking of Christ, wrote,

“In him the whole building is joined together
and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.
And in him you too are being built together
to become a dwelling
in which God lives by his Spirit.”

Ephesians 2:21-22 NIV

The church becomes, thus, a living, growing temple. It is where God lives in a special way. Yet, He is greater than the church. Indeed, He is greater than the whole of creation. Just as the tent that Moses built and the temple that Solomon built were only foreshadows of God’s heavenly abode, so also the church gives only a foretaste of heaven.

HEAVEN IS GOD’S TEMPLE

When Jesus was elevated to the right hand of God, He entered heaven itself. The book of Hebrews says,

“For Christ did not enter
a man-made sanctuary
that was only a copy of the true one;
he entered heaven itself,
now to appear for us in God’s presence.”

Hebrews 9:24 NIV

The apostle John had a vision in which he saw heaven, and noticed that it had no temple in it. The reason heaven has no temple in it is because the Father and the Son are there. No temple is needed in heaven, for They are its temple. John said,

“I did not see a temple in the city,
because the Lord God Almighty
and the Lamb [Jesus] are its temple.”

Revelation 21:22 NIV

Jesus’ entry into heaven has opened the way for His followers, so that they, too, might pass through the curtain of death and enter the Most Holy Place. The book of Hebrews says,

“Therefore, brothers,
since we have confidence
to enter the Most Holy Place
by the blood of Jesus,
by a new and living way
opened for us through the curtain,
that is, his body,…”

Hebrews 10:19-20 NIV

In the meanwhile, until Jesus’ faithful followers are privileged to enter personally into heaven, they have an advocate in heaven, a great high priest, Jesus the Lord. For that reason they can be confident that their prayers will be heard in heaven and that their requests will be acted upon by heaven. The book of Hebrews says,

“...and since we have a great priest
over the house of God,
let us draw near to God
with a sincere heart
in full assurance of faith,
having our hearts sprinkled
to cleanse us from a guilty conscience
and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

Hebrews 10:21-22 NIV

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. The New Testament says (in several places) that Jesus went into the mountains to pray (for example in Matthew 14:23); but it never says that Jesus went into the temple to pray? Why do you suppose the New Testament never says that Jesus went into the temple to pray?
2. Did the children of Israel need an earthly tent or temple in order to implement fully the laws of the Old Testament? Do believers in Jesus need an earthly temple in order to implement fully what Jesus said for them to do? What do your answers tell you about the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament?
3. The temple in Jerusalem was last destroyed in AD 70. Do you think it should be rebuilt?
4. Does it matter in what kind of building the believers in Jesus worship God?
5. In what way can your body be considered to be a temple of God?
6. What can a person do in order to get his or her body to become a temple of God?
7. How can a person keep his or her temple holy after he or she has become a temple of God?
8. In what ways is being in the church like being in heaven?