

REBUILDING: The Temple of Your Life

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The most important place of connection during our time on the planet—with God and with people—has always been, and still is today, the house of worship.

Among the Hebrew people, whom God chose from among the nations of the earth in order to reveal His gracious salvation, that house was the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet, merely as an illustration, a temporary pattern, for the God-connection was drawing nearer than anyone suspected (but that's for later).

For now, let's consider the role of the Tabernacle/Temple in the lives of God's ancient, chosen people, the Hebrews.

I hasten to remind you that this Meeting Place was God's idea. He brought the idea to Moses, and told him to build it strictly according to a pattern that God showed Him during their meeting on Mount Sinai. The Lord said to Moses, *"You must build this Tabernacle and its furnishings exactly according to the pattern I will show you"* (Exodus 25:9).

It was first introduced as a mobile meeting place—a tabernacle, a tent—because God's people were themselves mobile, enroute to the Promised Land. As soon as they broke free from enslavement to the Egyptians, Moses introduced the Tabernacle as their place of meeting to worship and pray, to offer sacrifice and receive God's blessing.

The Tabernacle was the geographic center of their encampment, and the spiritual center of their communal life. Wherever it was planted they settled; whenever it was moved they moved with it.

For instance... The twelve tribes set up their camps in precise arrangement around the Tabernacle, with every tent door facing the Place of Meeting. God's presence was signified by a pillar of cloud that was visible during the day and at night by a pillar of fire that could be seen for miles. When the Cloud appeared to hover at the door of the Tabernacle, the people would leave their tents to pray. When the same Cloud arose and began to move, the people packed their things and followed it. When the Cloud descended and settled, the people stopped and set up their camp. All of life followed the Cloud.

As long as the Tabernacle was central to their identity and their lifestyle, it attracted the presence of Almighty God. When their attention wandered from the Tabernacle, the glow of God's favor diminished and His anger was aroused.

For instance... As their crops and flocks prospered and grew, the enjoyment of their prosperity eclipsed their worship of God. And their acquaintance with neighboring peoples introduced other religious rituals and symbols, which they often tried to incorporate into their own lives, reducing God-given expressions to "one of many" ways of observing faith. Sometimes, they completely adopted other gods and other religious practices as their own. These changes were actually a decline of their faith in Jehovah, and distanced them from His provision and protection, often leading to hostile takeovers by neighboring armies.

The Tabernacle was also the arena of the ministry of the priesthood, who represented the people to God with sacrifices and offerings and represented God to the people with prayers and blessings.

Once the people were settled in the Land that God had promised to them, God chose a place (Jerusalem) for His presence to abide, and He chose a man (David) to prepare the Temple.

While music and singing had always had a primary role in Hebrew worship, David developed a unique dimension of this worship of Jehovah, the Living God: perpetual choral and orchestral worship, 24/7, arranged by shifts.

Against all odds this form of worship persisted for hundreds of years, though at times the people faltered, until it finally faded into disuse, leaving only the shell of worship—the Temple and its ritual functions—the husk, without the heart.

Having lost the heart of worship, what remained of the form became the "new method." The means became the end, and the Temple became their idol. I call this period "the worship wasteland."

Into this wasteland of worship came the Son of God, Jesus, to awaken the people's sense of God, and the sense of what they had lost, and to restore the heart of worship to the people of God. *"The Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost"* (Luke 19:10).

This concept of the centrality of the Tabernacle (worship) and the wasteland of life-without-it gives a clearer meaning to the term "lost." Lostness is not a prevailing sense of confusion or lack of confidence, for some who are intelligent and clear-minded are also thoroughly lost. It is not the condition of social misfits, but of people—however bright, educated, wealthy, healthy, or religious—who have lost their sense of God, of His absolute greatness and His unfailing love. It is the condition of those who cannot find God—His presence or His purpose.

Jesus rebuilt the core of His followers' lives around the presence of God and re-centered their communal life around His worship. He sent to us the Holy Spirit.

From that day to this, Christ has been restoring the Temple to its proper place and glorious function--no longer in buildings made of wood and stone, but now (and forever) in human hearts of flesh, yielded and flexible and focused by faith on life-with-God. *"That greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands"* (Hebrews 9:11).

As a related aside, I discovered a Jewish course on the Torah (the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible) that offers a segment on the centrality of the Tabernacle in Jewish faith and life. Those of you who have celebrated a Seder dinner with me, or who are familiar with the explanation of the three symbolic matzos used in that dinner, will derive rich meaning from this brief illustration.

The Jewish Torah is divided into 54 segments (parashahs). From the beginning of the plan for the Tabernacle to the arrangement of the Jewish encampment around the Tabernacle covers 18 parashahs, and they happen to be exactly the "middle third" of the entire Torah (18 parashahs preceding and 18 parashahs following), emphasizing the centrality of the Tabernacle/Temple to God's purpose and to the life of God's faithful people.

In the Seder there are three special matzos, which I believe represent the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). At one point in the meal, the "middle matzo" is withdrawn, broken in half, and one half is buried or hidden from view. Later it is found and returned. I am satisfied that this is a picture of Jesus the Son, who became a human, was broken in death, buried, rose from the dead on the third day, and returned to Heaven.

I saw a correlation between the middle matzo (Jesus) and the middle third of the Torah (the Tabernacle). Jesus *is* that true and “perfect Tabernacle... not made by human hands.” He is our meeting place with the Father, for He said, “*If you have seen me, you have seen the Father*” (John 14:9). As such, He is to be kept central to all that we think and say and do.

This, then, is the central task of the Christian life, of our lives of faith today: to worship God through Jesus Christ in the core of our beings and at the center of our lives, perpetually.

“Don’t you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body”
(1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

It is a task that is seriously threatened—from within and from without—on a daily basis. In the contemporary “worship wasteland” other things and other people have taken God’s place as the center of our desire and attention.

For instance... Acts of worship, like the great Jewish feasts of worship devolved into festivals of food and entertainment. Such events persist today as an attempted expression of community, devoid of faith and hope and love, but full of eating, drinking, and entertainment.

For instance... Musical worship in many quarters of the Church has devolved into concerts and choirs and competitions for the entertainment of the soul, lacking the fierce focus of faith in God and the lifting influence of His Spirit.

Old habits die hard.

Even now, much of what we call worship is about good vibes and good feelings, instead of strong faith in God. If the music is good and the lyrics are positive, we don’t even need to mention Jesus’ name or to have God visit us anymore.

What will it take for Jesus to rebuild the true Temple in our lives again? What will it take for God’s people today to become truly centered around the One who rescued us from slavery to sin and the fires of Hell?

From the Book of Ezra (3:1-6), who led the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem:

In early autumn, when the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled in Jerusalem with a unified purpose. ² *Then Jeshua son of Jehozadak joined his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his family in **rebuilding the altar of the God of Israel**. They wanted to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, as instructed in the Law of Moses, the man of God.* ³ *Even though the people were afraid of the local residents, they rebuilt the altar at its old site. Then they began to sacrifice burnt offerings on the altar to the Lord each morning and evening.*

⁴ *They celebrated the Festival of Shelters as prescribed in the Law, sacrificing the number of burnt offerings specified for each day of the festival.* ⁵ *They also offered the regular burnt offerings and the offerings required for the new moon celebrations and the annual festivals as prescribed by the Lord. The people also gave voluntary offerings to the Lord.* ⁶ *Fifteen days before the Festival of Shelters began, the priests had begun to sacrifice burnt offerings to the Lord. This was even before they had started to lay the foundation of the Lord’s Temple.*

Rebuild the altar, restore the sacrifices of worship, lay the foundation as before, raise the walls of the Temple, furnish it. It all begins at the altar...

From Christ's letter to the church of Ephesus (Revelation 2:4-5):

⁴ *I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first!* ⁵ *Look how far you have fallen! **Turn back to me and do the works you did at first.** If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.*

Repent, return to God, redo our first works. It all begins at an altar of repentance, with an admission of how far we have fallen from God's pattern, and a pledge to rebuild what has been lost.

The story of the Tabernacle/Temple is a picture of putting God first in life—not last, nor even second, but FIRST. It is a most challenging requirement—if we will even recognize it as a requirement. Wandering is a habit of the mind; therefore, repentance must become the habit of our soul.

Will you join me—will you join Christ—in rebuilding a holy Temple for the presence of Almighty God? Will you make your heart His altar? Will you make your life His praise? Build an altar for Him right now, today, and tell Him what, with His help, you intend to do.