The Growing Temple

Text: Ephesians 2:20-22

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**Scriptures:** 1 Peter 2:1-12; 1 Kings 6:1-13; Ephesians 2:11-22

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 352, 90, 84, 395, 523

Series: Ephesians

Theme: God is building a holy temple in which He dwells constructed from His people who are joined together on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.

Proposition: Brothers and sisters, we are all part of the growing holy temple of God which the Lord is building by working in us through His Word Spirit.

**Introduction**

Anyone familiar with building sites knows that throughout the construction process there are regular deliveries of materials; concrete and steel for the foundation, often timber and then cladding for the walls, trusses and roofing materials to go on top.

The practice of gathering materials from different suppliers in order to make a building is nothing new. When King Solomon set out to build the temple in Jerusalem, he sourced cedar and cypress timber from Lebanon which were then transported on rafts by sea (1 Kings 5:9). He also had costly stones quarried in Israel which were shaped and prepared there before being brought to the building site (1 Kings 6:7).

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul writes about a new temple construction. The materials are not timber and stones, but people, both Jews and non-Jews. All those who have been chosen by God in Christ. These people were once ‘*dead in their trespasses and sins*’ (Eph 2:1), but they have now been made spiritually alive together with Christ (2:5). They are now ‘holy ones’, saints, who by God’s grace through adoption (1:5) have become members of His family. Our text in Ephesians 2:20-22 describes the construction of this living temple which is still in the process of growing. We are going to look at this building under three headings:

1. A solid foundation
2. A connected structure
3. A dwelling place for God
4. **A solid foundation**

If you look at photographs of the foundations for the Christchurch church building on Cornwall Street, you’ll see how solid they are. There is a thick concrete slab with a very large quantity of steel mesh embedded within. Underneath this slab over 170 timber piles have been driven down to rest firmly on the gravel bed many meters below this floor level. A strong foundation is essential if a building is going to withstand the forces which may be exerted upon it through wind, flood, earthquake and gradual ground settling. This is just as true now as it has been throughout human history.

The general population in 1st century Israel understood the importance of solid foundations to which Jesus refers in the ‘sermon on the mount’ when He spoke about the ‘*wise man who built his house on the rock*’ (Matt 7:24). The new temple, about which the Apostle writes in our text, is built on the most solid foundation, that of ‘*the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone*’ (Eph 2:20). The word ‘apostle’ literally means ‘a person sent’ (on a mission).

The apostles in Scripture were tasked by Christ to be his witnesses to the world (Acts 1:8). They were commissioned to spread the gospel. Eleven of the New Testament apostles had been part of Jesus’s ‘inner circle’ of twelve disciples with the exception of Judas Iscariot who took his own life after he betrayed the Lord. Matthias was chosen by God to replace Judas (Acts 1:24) through the providential casting of lots. After his conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul was accepted as an apostle, having been commissioned by Christ (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1). All the apostles were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul being able to claim that he had ‘seen the (risen) Lord’ (1 Cor 9:1).

The ‘prophets’ could either refer to:

* The Old Testament prophets who most reminded God’s people of His will and past promises and who also spoke of the future fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation through the Messiah.
* Those 1st century Christians who had the temporary supernatural gift of being able to reveal divine truth which had not, at that time, been written and incorporated into the Bible.
* The apostles themselves as they functioned in their prophetic role. The definite article ‘the’ before ‘apostles’ but not ‘prophets’ does support this, although ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’ are separate groups of people in the list which Paul will later write in Ephesians 4:11.

So, what can we say about these foundational elements of the new temple? It is not so much that they are extraordinary people, but that through their preaching and teaching they brought an extraordinary message: the gospel of Jesus Christ. Faithful Old Testament prophets delivered this message through ‘types and shadows’ (e.g. Col 2:17) which pointed forward to the mystery of the gospel which would later be fully revealed. Faithful 1st century Christians with the gift of prophesy (e.g. 1 Cor 12:29) delivered this message. Faithful apostles delivered this message. Think for example of the words of Paul in 1 Cor 11:23 “*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread*”.

The permanent foundation of the new temple is **not** a group of men with the names Simon, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddeus and Simon (Matt 10:4) together with Matthias and Paul, but rather the preaching and teaching of the apostles; which is the revelation of God Himself through the whole Scripture.

The new temple is founded on the solid base of God’s Word; which reveals the person and work of Christ. Do you remember when Peter confessed the truth about Jesus saying, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matt 16:16)? Then Jesus said to him “*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*” (Matt 16:18). Jesus was not saying that the new temple, the New Testament church, would be built on the man Peter, but rather upon his confession as a representative apostle. The true church is the apostolic church – the new temple which is founded upon the teaching of the apostles about Christ. The foundation of the true church is the doctrine of the Scriptures - as taught by the apostles and prophets. This is why we place such emphasis on the truth of the Bible being taught here in this local church.

Notice also that Christ Jesus is described as being the ‘cornerstone’ of this new temple. The Greek word used here also translates the word ‘cornerstone’ in the Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX) in Isaiah 28:16 "*Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation*”. Psalm 118:22 uses the imagery of the cornerstone to refer to the promised coming Messiah: “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone*”.

However, the Greek word used here in the Greek Old Testament (and by Paul in our text) does not actually mean a ‘cornerstone’ (which was the key element in ensuring that a stone foundation was correctly aligned) but it literally means the stone which crowns a building; a ‘capstone’. This is like the ‘top stone’ of Zerubbabel’s temple which was the last one to be placed in position (Zech 4:7) as opposed to the foundation stone which Zerubbabel had also laid (Zech 4:9).

Yet, Paul describes Christ as the ‘foundation’ in 1 Cor 3:11. So, what can we say? The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is grounded upon His perfect person and completed work. He is the ‘*founder and perfecter of our faith*’ (Heb 12:2). He is also the crowning glory of the new temple, a building which is still under construction and will be finished when all the ‘building materials’ have been gathered and the universal church of all God’s elect people will be completed.

When a local church like this one is founded upon the true apostolic teaching in Scripture and relies for her strength, stability and ‘orientation’ of faith and life upon Christ Jesus, then that church has a strong foundation against which the gates of hell will not prevail! (Matt 16:18). We have security and strength in the church from a solid foundation. Praise God! We, brothers and sisters, are also part of a connected structure:

1. **A connected structure**

The parts of a building need to be held together in some way, otherwise the structure will soon fall apart. Building materials today are attached to one another using things like nails, screws, bolts, locking joints and strong glue. The stones from which the walls of Solomon’s temple were constructed were carefully prepared at the quarry so that they would fit together.

In the ancient world, stonemasons would drill aligned holes in two stones to be place alongside each other and then pour molten lead down the channel, thereby locking the stones together as the liquid metal cooled to form a solid connecting shaft.

The new temple is not constructed of inanimate stones, but of people like you and me which the Scripture describes as being ‘*living stones… being built up as a spiritual house*” (1 Pet 2:5). These ‘living stones’ are connected; being, in the words of our text, “*joined together*’ (v21). The verb is in the present tense. This ‘joining together’ is an ongoing process of connecting the people with one another to form the new temple so that the structure is progressively built. The ‘connecting together’ of the church is not yet complete! There is more growth to come in two ways: a) Growth in numbers as the Lord continues to gather more ‘building materials’ from many different people groups to be joined into the church; b) Growth in godliness, holiness, sanctification, Christlikeness as we progressively ‘*grow into a holy temple in the Lord*’. In these ways those who are in Christ are ‘*being built together*’.

Later in this letter, the Apostle Paul will write about Christ’s gifts of ‘*apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers*’ whose role in the growing church is to ‘*equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the* ***building up*** *of the body of Christ*’ (Eph 4:12). How are we being built up in Christ to be this new temple, represented here in this local church? Here is one key way; by following the pattern of the foundational apostles and prophets, as Paul will describe later in this letter: by ‘*speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*” (Eph 4:15). “When each part is working properly” this ‘*makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love*” (Eph 4:16).

The ‘mechanism’ God uses is His Word, accompanied by the Holy Spirit who convicts us and leads us in all truth. Paul will write in much more detail in the second half of this letter about how we are to continually become more and more ‘joined together’. One of the most vital ways in which we grow in connection to one another is by how we ‘speak the truth in love’. Damaging patterns of speech work to tear down the temple of God’s people, whereas wise words build up.

Proverbs 12:18 contrasts destructive and constructive speech: “*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing*”. This destructive talk may be: corrupting (Eph 4:29); or driven by bitterness, wrath and anger (Eph 4:31); or slander or malicious (Eph 4:31). Speech like this can severely damage a church. It can be like taking a sledgehammer to the walls of a physical building.

In contrast to speech which is constructive: good for building up, as fits the occasion (Eph 4:29); giving grace to those who hear (Eph 4:29); kind to others and tender-hearted (Eph 4:32). Speech like this brings restoration; repairing damage to the church and building up the ‘new temple’ to be stronger and more glorious. It is generally true that churches which grow are characterized by people who speak well to one another so that the connection between members in the body is strengthened. When we speak and act in ways which please the Lord, we reflect His glory in our lives and we show that God Himself lives in this new temple, which brings us to our third point:

1. **A dwelling place for God**

Each of us has a physical address which identifies where we live most of the time (apart from when we travel away for work or holidays or other events). This is our ‘dwelling place’. A dwelling is a place where someone lives. For humans in Biblical times this was either a tent (e.g. Gen 25:27) or a house (2 Sam 7:2), or else the territory in which they lived (Gen 36:40,43).

Sometimes people ask the question “Where is God?” It’s not a very helpful question because He does not have a physical ‘dwelling place” like us because, God is spirit (John 4:24). He is ‘**immanent**’. This means that He is present in every place in this creation with His whole being. In Psalm 139, David expresses the immanence of God in these words: “*Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*” (Psalm 139:7-8) God is also ‘**transcendent**’. This means that this creation is not part of the person of God. He is separate from all that He has made and is in no way limited by space, time, natural processes or the actions of his creatures.

So, what does the Scripture in Ephesians 2:22 “*In him you also are being built together into* ***a dwelling place for God*** *by the Spirit*” mean? Other parts of the Bible help us to interpret this verse correctly. After the people of Israel worshipped the golden calf, Moses met with God in ‘the tent of meeting’ which was pitched outside the camp (Exo 33:7-11; 34:34-35). This placement represented the estrangement of the people from God. When Moses fellowshipped with the Lord, receiving divine revelation, he came out with a shining face – reflecting the glory of God. The ‘tent of meeting’ subsequently became the Tabernacle - a large, movable tent in which His presence dwelt (Exo 25.8). David declares in Psalm 26 (8) “*O LORD, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells*”.

When King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem this was in fulfilment of the Lord’s promise to his Father David through Nathan the prophet: “ *He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*” (2 Sam 7:13). The temple was the place where God was worshipped, where His glory was seen and where His people had fellowship with Him through the ministry of the priests. Remember the vision of Ezekiel when He saw the glory of the Lord leaving the temple (Eze 10:18) having earlier seen the mobile throne chariot of God in a vision by the Chebar canal in Babylon. He summarised what he saw then by saying “*Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord*’ (Eze 1:28). About six centuries later, John the gospel writer would pen these words about Jesus Christ;” And *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).

Now we can put all this together and understand what it means for the immanent, transcendent, Living God to make his dwelling place in the new temple about which the Apostle Paul writes in our text. The new temple is where God’s people have fellowship with God, see the glory of God and receive the revelation of God.

These are the significant differences between the transcendent presence of God everywhere and his ‘special’ presence in dwelling with His people is ‘*by the Spirit*’ (2:22). Brothers and sisters, we know that God dwells in us both individually and collectively as a gathered congregation: Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (6:19). We can see the glory of God as the Holy Spirit illuminates the Scriptures and we receive revelation from God’s Word. We are able through prayer and hearing His Word to have fellowship with the Living God as individual believers.

Together we are also the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16). As we gather together to meet with God as a congregation, we see His glory, receive divine revelation through His Word and Spirit and have fellowship with our God. In our text, the emphasis is on the collective, connected, gathered community of God’s people. This is a universal (‘catholic’) church made up of all of God’s children in every place throughout history which is represented on this earth by individual church congregations like the one in 1st century Ephesus to which Paul writes and like this one gathered here today.

Together brothers and sisters, we are being “*built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit”.* When we meet together, we foreshadow the future reality of the temple of God in the New Heavens and New Earth where the “*dwelling place of God will be with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God*” (Rev 21:3).

When people see the church, when they see us, they should be able to see something of the glory of God reflected in us: not with physically shining faces like that of Moses when he met with God in the tabernacle, but in our lives. Lives which have been transformed by having received the ‘apostolic’ teaching about who Jesus Christ is and what He has done to save sinners like us. Lives which are strengthened and enlivened through fellowship with the Living God.

Solomon had a huge workforce who did not volunteer, but were conscripted to build the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5:13). There would have been very skilled craftsmen amongst the 80,000 stonecutters, the myriad of carpenters and the artists who carved the gourds and flowers in the inner sanctuary (1 Kings 6:18). The temple was built by hard physical labour and fine workmanship with different materials, all under the supervision of officers (1 Kings 5:16).

In the church of the Lord Jesus the ‘workforce’ is differently motivated and tasked. We, brothers and sisters, are to be willing workers in this new temple under the Lordship of Christ, the head of the church. We are to serve with gladness and joy, motivated first and foremost by love for our Lord, and secondly by love for one another. This is vitally important because this new temple is a dwelling place for God in which we ourselves “*like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 2:5).

AMEN