

Sunday, August 7th sermon: "A Tent, Not a House -- God With Us in the Flesh"

Preached at the Lord's Table at Grace Bible Church in Greenwood, MS, by John Pittman Hey

2 Samuel 7:6-7; Matthew 1:20-23

Men have long erected great temples and cathedrals to their gods, to propitiate them, to sacrifice to them, to lay claim to them as their gods, to make them to dwell with them.

The buildings are often gilded with gold and precious stones, and are things of great beauty.

But sooner or later, the buildings become idols, the things worshipped, in place of their gods.

Temples are also used to "box God in," and thereby exclude Him in some sense from everyday life. We think we are safe from God so long as we are not in "His presence" in "His temple."

King David wished to build God a house, but by the time Jesus came along, the temple had been made an idol, and was corrupted with money and commerce and thievery.

The Jews were so fixated on the glories of their temple, that they couldn't see the glories of Christ. Well said Isaiah, "when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him!"

When they demanded a sign of Jesus, He replied, "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

They confused their temple, in which they falsely believed that God dwelt, with the body of the Lord Jesus, wherein dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily!

They would have guarded their temple, but they destroyed Christ.

They tried to bring charges against Jesus at His trial that He had threatened to destroy their precious temple.

They confused the true temple of God, which is not their building, but the Savior Himself.

He is the promised Messiah! He is God incarnate in human flesh!

Yet they denied Him, insulted Him, degraded Him, and put Him to death on the cross.

It seems that, for Israel, nothing about Jesus could compare to their great temple, that they thought was God's house.

But scripture tells us differently: it's not the building, or the temple, where God dwells with us - it is in His Dear Son, incarnate in His humanity!

The angel told Jesus' adopted earthly father Joseph that Jesus was conceived in Mary by the Holy Ghost, and that He would save His people from their sin. All this was done to fulfill the prophet, who foretold how a virgin will conceive, and her son will be called "God with us."

Hebrews is constantly exalting Jesus in His body above all that is the Jewish temple: Christ is the very brightness of God's glory, and the express image of the Godhead! He has by Himself purged our sins!

In chapter two, Hebrews describes the lowliness of Jesus in His incarnation, and how He was given a human body so that He could suffer death to save us. Indeed, that very body of Christ is shown to be our salvation.

Jesus did not take on the nature of angels, but rather the nature of human beings. No doubt, had He appeared as an angel, the people would have respected Him in all that splendor, and yet, in Christ's very body was the image of God to us, and the presence of God with us.

Perhaps this confusion by the Jewish people between the temple building, and the person of Messiah, and His great sacrificial work in His body, and not in the temple, began innocently enough in David's mind when he decided he ought to build a House for God to dwell in.

But God forbade David, reminding him that "I have never dwelt in any house since the time I brought Israel out of Egypt, even to this day ... I never spake a word with any of the tribes of Israel, saying, Why build ye not me a house of cedar?"

Instead, God promised to build David a house - not a palace, but rather a dynasty and reign, as well as give a land to Israel in which to dwell.

To be sure, God promised that David's son Solomon would build Him "a house for His name," but not to dwell in.

Buried in these promises to David, was the promise of the Messiah that was yet to come, the true dwelling place of God with His people, the incarnation of God the Son, our Lord Jesus.

It was two little phrases in 2 Samuel 7 that brought this preacher's heart to tears of joy: God told Nathan to tell David a precious truth about how God dwells with His people, not in buildings.

God said, I have not dwelt in a house, but I have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle, in all the places wherein I have walked with the children of Israel!

God had always walked with His people in a tent!

Thus was the image of Christ that was to come revealed by God to David.

The tabernacle is a very apt image of the body of Christ, God clothed upon, as it were, by the animal skins and fabrics and poles and wooden planks and sockets.

It points to that day when God would clothe His Son in the flesh and bones of mankind, and walk amongst us, as "God with us!"

Look back to how God described His communion with His people via the tent of congregation, the tabernacle:

"Thou shalt make a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them."

God describes all the animal skins and wooden structure of that tent, and the holy place, and the ark of the covenant, with its blood-stained mercy seat where the sacrificial blood was sprinkled to make an atonement for the people's sins.

It was in that tent, above the mercy seat, that God then promised: "there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee."

In olden times, God walked with His people clothed with the tent, and met with them where propitiation was made for His people.

So it is that we do not meet with Christ in a cathedral, or a grand temple, or an imposing church building.

Communing with God is never about temples and buildings and golden edifices, but about meeting with Jesus at the mercy seat, His very body and blood given for our redemption.

We meet with Christ at His Table. He has designated, not gold or silver boxes - called by some "tabernacles" - but rather His body and blood, signified by the humble, commonplace symbols of bread and wine.

Not in a grand cathedral or temple, but rather God dwells with His people in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

He is present with us in our hearts, and by these symbols which point to Our God with us.

Christ's body is the true tabernacle of God wherein He walks with His people.

O, let us perceive the body of Christ as the true house of God, and one day, we shall see Him bodily with our own eyes!

No wonder Isaac Watts penned these glorious words:

"His dying crimson, like a robe,  
spread o'er His Body on the Tree;  
Then I am dead to all the globe,  
and all the world is dead to me!"