

The New Temple

Ephesians 2:14-22

The Lord is always with His people, *Emmanuel*, God with us whether “in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth” (Heb. 11:38) or in a beloved 40-year-old church building in Bothell. It’s common among evangelicals to say, “The church is not a building but a people” and this is good as far as it goes. But we want to grow in grace and gratitude in response to this gift, asking the Lord to bless us for generations of faithful worship in this place.

Summary of the Text

Paul writes to Gentiles in Ephesus, many former worshippers of the goddess Diana. They were strangers to the covenants of promise and without hope in the world (Eph. 2:12). Now Christ their peace has brought them near and broken down the wall of partition in the temple that separated Jews and Gentiles (v. 14). The court of the Gentiles was a designated space on the east side of the temple which kept them from going further in since they were not part of the priestly people of Israel. But in His death, Jesus abolished the Old Testament ordinances, the ceremonial laws, that kept Jew and Gentile apart and created one new man. He reconciled them both to God in one body by means of the cross (vv. 15-16). He came and preached peace both to Gentiles who were far away and Jews who were near so that through Him we all have access to the Father through one Spirit (vv. 17-18). This means Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners but now citizens, saints, and members of God’s household (v. 19). We all stand on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ set as the chief cornerstone from which the whole building grows into a holy temple (vv. 20-21). Jesus prophesied that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed within one generation (Matt. 24:34), but He continues building the true temple, the temple of His body, the Church, for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (v. 22).

The Presence of God

The Lord has always intended to fill the world with His presence and glory. The Bible begins with creation as God repeatedly divides and fills and calls it “good.” It’s “very good” when He makes Adam and Eve in His image, and then tells them to expand their garden paradise, to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:26-28). Made in God’s image, they would create like Him, dividing and filling, taking dominion and transforming the wilderness of the world into a cultivated garden-city where God would dwell with them. When sin entered, communion between God and man was wrecked. Rather than dwelling in Eden and working for good, Adam and Eve are exiled from the garden away from His presence. Ever since we have wanted to get back. J.R.R. Tolkien said, “We all long for [Eden], and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most human, is still soaked with a sense of ‘exile.’” God didn’t leave us alone nor did He change His mission to “fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). He promises Adam and Eve a seed who will crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15). He calls Abraham out of Ur and promises to bless all the families and nations of the earth through him. In Exodus, Moses builds a tabernacle, a portable tent where God dwells with His people, most powerfully in the holy of holies. After construction is complete, the Lord fills the house and His presence is so radiant and powerful that even Moses has to get out (Ex. 40:34-35). After they inherit the promise land, Solomon builds God a “permanent” house, the temple: “Then Solomon spoke: ‘The Lord said He would dwell in the dark cloud. I have surely built You an exalted house, and a place for You to dwell in forever’” (2 Chron. 6:1-2). This is the place God’s people would worship, pray toward and rejoice in, where they would travel for the three annual pilgrim feasts, and long for during exile, “the joy of the whole earth” (Ps. 48:2).

When God Leaves

But the presence of God is double-edged sword. We are drawn to His power, beauty, goodness, and glory, but God is consuming fire and therefore dangerous to those despise Him. This is why He sanctified Israel as a

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priestly people, the tribe of Levi to take care of the tabernacle and minister to the people, and the family of Aaron to serve as priests ordained to deal with holy things. None of the faithful ever thought the Lord was confined to a place or building. Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple, “But will God indeed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built! Yet regard the prayer of Your servant and his supplication, O Lord my God, and listen to the cry and the prayer which Your servant is praying before You” (2 Chron. 6:18-19). He anticipated what would happen if Israel broke covenant and went into exile: “Or if Your people Israel are defeated before an enemy because they have sinned against You, and return and confess Your name, and pray and make supplication before You in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of Your people Israel, and bring them back to the land which You gave to them and their fathers” (vv. 24-25). The saddest times in Israel occurred when God departed. Phinehas’ wife named her son Ichabod, “the glory has departed”, when the ark was captured by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:21). Ezekiel describes the abominations Israel commits in the temple weeping for Tammuz, worshiping the sun, and bowing down to images which leads to the unthinkable: “Then the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple” (Ezek. 10:18; ch. 8). He leaves. He’s not beholden to any place. You can’t put God in box, a temple, a church, a denomination, a people group or anything else that can be controlled by men. Jeremiah rebukes those who say, “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” while breaking His commandments and worshiping other gods (Jer. 7:4). The goal of an institution isn’t to perpetuate its existence. That happens when it becomes a business, right before it turns into a racket. To make fundamental compromises in order to keep the lights on is to abandon the mission. Every church, school, and organization will drift from its mission and need to die and be reborn. Names don’t have to change, but new wine requires new wine skins. This is good news for us because we worship a God who rose from the dead and raises the dead to new life. Christians must be conservatives in order to preserve what we have been given, but also radicals in the sense of going back to the *radix*, the root. Jesus Christ is the root. Or to use His metaphor, He is the vine, and we are the branches (Jn. 15).

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“And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). Jesus is the true temple, the meeting place of God and man. After He cleansed the temple the first time He told the Jews, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19). John tells us He was talking His body and that after His resurrection the disciples remembered this and understood. The whole point of the temple was to come near to God and in the fullness of time God took on flesh so that we could be reconciled to the Father through the death of His Son. Jesus rose and poured out the same Spirit that filled the temple that drove everyone out, but this time He drew us all together, Jew and Gentile, united and filled with that same Spirit. God didn’t abandon His plan to fill the earth with His presence. At the end of the Bible, we have a new heaven and a new earth with the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3). This space is holy because God is here in the presence of His people. There’s nothing special in the sheetrock or chairs or property lines. If these things were treated like they were in holy in themselves, it would be time to leave them, a holy iconoclasm. Even Scripture can be idolized (Jn. 5:39). But trusting in God, everything can be used and done to the glory of God. Be built together in the church for a dwelling place of God by the Spirit. Seek Him and may He bless His people to love Him and one another to His glory.