

THE TEMPLE OF GOD

1 CORINTHIANS 3:16-23

God has always had a headquarters on Earth!

When the nation Israel was born the Almighty dwelt among them in an elaborate tent constructed by Moses. The Tabernacle stood in Shiloh for 350 years.

Later, God set up His command in a Temple built by Solomon. It was a grand and glorious Temple...

The rabbis taught that the Earth was holy to the Lord. But on Earth the holiest land was Israel. Within Israel the holiest city was Jerusalem. In Jerusalem the holiest place was the Temple. And in the Temple the holiest spot was the inner court, called "*the Holy of Holies*," where the tangible presence of God's glory resided. God inhabited this Temple for 400 years.

But when Jesus was born God dwelt in another type of Temple - a house made of flesh, blood, and bone.

Not a tent - not a building... but a person, a human.

The glory of God came to dwell in a man. John 1:14 says of the birth of Jesus, “The Word became flesh and dwelt (or *tabernacled* - *He temped*) among us...”

In John 2:19 Jesus Himself spoke of His body as a temple. He said to the Jews, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews thought He was speaking of a brick-and-mortared temple. But John explains, “He was speaking of the temple of His body” - specifically, the timing of His resurrection.

The point is, God has always had a Temple - *a dwelling on earth where His presence could be found.*

The *Tabernacle of Moses*, the *Temple of Solomon*, the *Body of Jesus*... But when the risen Lord ascended to heaven, God chose a fourth and final Temple. It's God's last outpost on Earth. He chose *us - the Church!*

We are now “*the temple of God*” - a dwelling for the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit not only dwells in each of us, individually, but He also resides among us, corporately.

God's Spirit acts as we act. He loves as we love. He breathes life into our interactions. The Church as a whole - our fellowship together - creates a Temple.

Earlier in Chapter 3 Paul referred to himself as “*a wise master builder.*” He'd laid a sure and solid “*foundation.*”

The church in Corinth was built on Jesus! But how the Corinthians were building on that foundation would one day be inspected. Attitudes will be put to the test.

What is done from a pure heart and right motivation will adorn the church as gold, silver, precious stones. Whereas, pride and selfishness - like wood, hay, and stubble - will be burned up in the fire of God's holiness.

This is why the carnality - and spiritual immaturity - so evident in the Church at Corinth, was grievous to God.

There were splinter groups in this church. Corinth was a fractured family. Believers had gravitated toward their favorite teachers. Cliques and fan clubs had formed.

Some believers were "of Paul" - others "of Apollos." Their sectarian attitude was repulsive to God. It grieved Him to watch His family torn apart by a divisive spirit.

And now to jar them out of their carnality, Paul reminds the Corinthians of God's higher purpose for them. He writes in verse 16, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*"

Here's what boggles my brain... Paul refers to the Church - the flawed Church at Corinth; as well as, every church - as God's "*dwelling place.*" His "*temple.*"

It's true you can go out into the woods, or sit by the lake, or climb a mountain, and behold the glory and wonders of God. All the world is God's domain.

But there's something special about the Church...

God camps out in His Church! It's home to God. The local church is where God builds a fire and warms His hands. In the Church, among the praises of His people, in fellowship with us - our eternal God is most at home.

I love Psalm 22:3. It's a picture of the OT Temple that sheds a light on the NT Church. The psalmist tells us that God inhabited the praises of His people, Israel.

Literally, *God was enthroned in their praises.*

When sacrifices were offered on the altar in the Temple the aroma rose to heaven as a sweet-smell to God... Likewise, God relishes the worship and praise that rises up to Him from the confines of His church.

Never take our worship times for granted. It's not just entertainment. Heartfelt worship brings God pleasure.

As we praise God we fulfill our role as *"His temple."*

I get so much joy from gathering up my grandsons in one place, and spending time with them. *This is God's attitude toward us. He gathers His kids as His Temple!*

In the OT, the Temple served two purposes. It was for **witness** and **worship**. It *heralded* God's praise, and *housed* God's glory. When men wanted to *come to God* or *interact with God* they journeyed to the Temple.

In the wilderness, directly over the Tabernacle's badger-skinned roof rested a glory cloud. It was called "**the Shekinah glory.**" Fire was enveloped in a cloud.

The *Tabernacle* was physical evidence of God's presence... The same was true of *Solomon's Temple*...

And people were attracted to *Jesus* for much the same reason. In Christ, God's glory was on display... *His miracles, His wisdom, His healing, His mercy*...

And this should be the reputation of every church.

As God's Temple we should be providing our community tangible evidence for God's presence. Our love for each other. The caring and nurturing we show, should draw men to explore the reason for such grace.

A person's search for God should lead him or her to the Church. We should be *a curiosity to our community*.

The people in Corinth had no problem believing that *God was in Christ*, but they had a harder time seeing that *Christ was in His Church*. Their splintering and fracturing was contrary to their role as God's Temple.

And sadly, the same fussing and friction that was present in Corinth, plagues many churches today.

This shouldn't be! *Our unity in the Spirit - our devotion to God's truth - our love for one another* is what enthrones Jesus, and makes His presence felt.

The goal of every church should be a display of God's presence so thick you can cut it with a knife. Our love should makes God evident to the world around us.

It's been said, "A church should make it easy for men to find God, and difficult for them to forget Him."

When Franklin Roosevelt was president, he frequently attended a church in Washington DC.

One weekend the pastor got a call from a reporter asking if the President planned to attend that Sunday.

I love the pastor's reply, "That, I cannot promise. But we expect God to be here, and we figure that will be incentive enough for a reasonably large attendance."

It's God's power and presence that should be our expectation whenever we gather as His Church.

But here's what's interesting, the Corinthians knew Christ. They understood their relationship with Him.

But that didn't mean they were equally aware of their relationship with each other. Paul asks with a sense of astonishment, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" He's saying, how could you have missed this?

Yet even today, Christians fail to see and appreciate their connection... their responsibility to each other...

In a 2013 Barna survey 1000 American adults were asked, "What do you think about going to church?"

30% said attending church wasn't important at all.

40% were ambivalent. They could take it or leave it.

Only 30% said church attendance was significant.

Of those who downplayed the importance of church 40% commented, “I find God elsewhere.” Another 35% complained that church wasn’t “personally relevant.”

I thought it was shocking that among the younger population 20% said that “God is missing” from church.

And of those who claimed to have grown spiritually in the past year, when asked, “What made your faith grow?” The church didn’t even make the Top Ten.

Christians today have lost touch with who we are!

We might think of our own bodies as God’s Temple, but we lack a corporate sense of our connection.

What would Paul say if he were among us, and watched how nonchalant we are about church?... *We’ll go if the kids don’t have games, or we’re not headed to the lake, or I’m not too tired from working in the yard.*

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God?”

I always reflect back on a quote I read years ago, “A US News survey revealed that 80% of Americans believe it’s possible to be a good Christian without ever attending a local church.” Paul and the NT disagrees.

Christianity is not just about personal enhancement and self-help. It's participation with other believers in ways that bring *God to people* and *glory to God*. John Wesley wrote, "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." To be in Christ is to be *part of His Body!*

You, and you, and you, and I, are God's Temple in the world today, and rather than mar that Temple by our apathy or ignorance - *we need to make it glorious.*

This is why Paul warns us in verse 17, "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which *temple* you are."

The word "*holy*" means "special." In the Bible it refers to what is "set apart or dedicated for God's own use."

What made the OT Temple "*holy*" wasn't its fine gold, and cedar timbers, and chiseled stone - it wasn't even the divinely-inspired plans that guided its construction.

The Temple was holy because God dwelt there. It was His house, and you don't mistreat His stuff. That's why in the OT, *Temple defiling* carried stiff penalties...

Read the first ten chapters of Ezekiel, and you'll find God's reaction when King Manasseh, and the later Judean kings, polluted His Temple. These wicked kings erected idols to other gods, and committed lewd acts.

Their behavior was bad enough, but to do it in the Temple was a slap in God's face. And God removed His presence... *slowly, gradually, reluctantly...* but *definitely...* Shortly thereafter, God brought judgment.

Those who *defiled* God's temple, God *destroyed*.

Actually, both Jesus and Daniel point to such an act as a mark of the future Antichrist. When this future ruler enters the rebuilt Temple, and sets up an idol of himself to be worshipped, God will take it as the ultimate insult.

It's this defilement that brings man's final judgment!

Today, we're appalled at the evils of Isis. All over Syria and Iraq terrorists have burned and defaced historic Christian churches. Yet here Paul isn't warning Muslims about defiling the Temple, but Christians.

He's warning us about demeaning our fellowship.

We need to know, there's nothing more *anti-Christ* than a Christian who defiles or neglects *the Body of Christ*. To cause division or strife, or to just settle for a disconnect - *that is, to care only that your own needs get met, without caring for others...* according to Paul, a Christian who acts this way, is defiling God's Temple.

Paul states in verse 17, *“If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him.”* The same Greek word gets used twice in this sentence. Literally, it reads, *“Damage the temple, and God will damage you.”*

It’s a scary thought, but *how you treat people in the Body of Christ, may be how you get treated in the end.*

Apparently, what was happening in Corinth with their pride, and prejudices, and jealousies, and silly divisions wasn’t so silly in the eyes of God. They were defiling what God considered *“holy”* - His Church.

And we’ll find out in the chapters to come this was just the tip of the iceberg. This church was rattled with problems - *they tolerated immorality, sued each other in pagan courts, caused one another to stumble over trivial issues, misunderstand singleness and marriage, violated the God-ordained roles for gender, misused their spiritual gifts, and even doubted the resurrection.*

And these sins would’ve been bad enough, but what made them especially egregious to God was that they were all sins against His Temple, the Church.

Paul warns again in verse 18, *“Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”*

Realize, voluntarily pledging yourself to a group of problem-plagued people looks foolish to the world.

This is how the world at large, views our commitment to God's church. Worldly wisdom will tell you to *stay socially mobile - see and be seen - hang out with the hip crowd. Why strap yourself to a ball and chain?*

Paul pointed out earlier, Chapters 1-2, the difference between *God's wisdom* and *the wisdom of this world*.

The **message of the cross**, the **make-up of the church**, even the **methods of the courier** (Paul himself) seemed weak and foolish through the lens of man's wisdom. Yet God works in ways our world calls foolish.

Paul noted the Jews were into power - the Greeks sought wisdom. But **the cross** appealed to neither. It was foolishness to Greeks, and weakness to the Jews. It was the antithesis of what the world valued most.

The same was true of **the Church**. When Paul looked around the room in the church at Corinth he saw, "**not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called...**" There weren't a lot of ex-athletes, or celebrities, or VIPs in this church.

Paul said of the Corinthian Christians, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty...”

Even Paul himself came to the Corinthians in a way that could've been construed as foolish. Rather than impress them with his style or smarts - he kept it simple. He preached nothing but *Christ crucified*.

Paul learned there's nothing for a Christian to gain by trying to impress *this* world. The *Christian message*, and *the Church*, both fly in the face of worldly wisdom.

God saves mankind not by human logic or ingenuity, but by simple faith... God chooses, not the elite, but the unlikely, to show off His grace and power...

God's ways often appear foolish at first, but Paul was willing to be a fool in the world's eyes to follow Christ.

Recall how Jesus taught in paradoxes... *The last will be the first... To be great be a servant... To save your life you first must lose it... Give and it shall be given unto you... Lay down your life and God will raise it up...*

Jesus knew the ways of His kingdom are a puzzle to our world. To roll with Him you can't be afraid of appearing foolish and frail in the eyes of others.

The world doesn't appreciate the wisdom of God.

Your friends ask, why get baptized? It seems weird to step into a pool and get dunked by a stranger...

Why go to church? There's no money in it. You don't get paid to go. In fact, they ask you to *give*... It seems silly listening to a guy talk from a 2000 year old book about subjects that are more spiritual than practical...

Why not sleep with your girlfriend - everybody else does it... *Fudge a little on your expense report* - it's a perk of the job... *Stop caring about the other guy* - look out for yourself... The suggestions goes on and on...

If you follow Jesus, and His Word, you'll be at odds with this world. You'll be labeled *"a fool."* Yet in the end God's wisdom will save you in more ways than one.

"For (Paul tells us in verse 19) it is written (in Job 5:13), "He catches the wise in their own craftiness..."

Folks think God's ways are foolish, but God turns the tables. Match wits with God and you end up the dimwit.

Try to outfox God and you'll get trapped. God's ways may appear foolish or silly, but He is infinitely wise, and God knows how to humble the arrogant man.

It reminds me of Wile E. Coyote. All his plans to catch the Roadrunner backfired. He hatched scheme after scheme, yet he always got caught in his own craftiness... This is the person who opposes God.

Humans think they're so smart - foolproof - but God's wisdom catches the proud in his own craftiness.

The classic example was Haman. Everyone bowed to the Persian official except a Jew named Mordecai.

Mordecai worshipped God alone, and Haman couldn't stand it! *Mordecai was a burr in his saddle...*

Haman plotted to exterminate the Jews, and built a gallows just for Mordecai... Yet read the book of Esther and you'll see how God turned the tables on Haman.

God delivered the Jews and Mordecai. Haman ended up hanging from the gallows he'd built for his enemy. God *"catches the wise in their own craftiness."*

"And again, (Paul quotes Psalm 94:11) "The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

It's surprising how confident we are in ourselves.

In 1950 a Gallup Poll asked High School Seniors the question, “Are you a very important person?” At the time 12% said, “yes.” They asked the same question to High School Seniors in 2005, and 80% said “yes.”

Time magazine asked Americans, “Are you in the top one percent of income earners?” Based on their responses, 19% of Americans are in the top 1 percent.

I’m just saying, the tendency for all of us is to think too highly of ourselves. Yet the Lord knows how to whittle us down to size. Become proud, take delight in your own genius, and God will prove to you your futility.

God is a chef - He’s always cooking something up - and His favorite dish, *His specialty dish*, is humble pie!

God is good at orchestrating circumstances that prove to us that He is God and we are not. In Psalm 94 the Hebrew word, “futile,” means “breath.” God knows the thoughts of the wisest men are nothing but hot air.

“Therefore let no one boast in men.” Remember, the Corinthians were exalting one teacher above another.

Paul is saying if humans in general are futile, and full of hot air, then don’t boast in any man. Don’t think one teacher is any more special than another. Only God

is infallible. *Men are not.* Thus, every human teacher has to be approached with a degree of healthy skepticism.

“Paul, Apollos, Peter (or Cephas)” were godly men, sincere teachers. At times they wrote inspired by the Holy Spirit - but on their own they were fallible men. Why choose one over another? *Learn from them all.*

When you listen to me, or the pastor down the street, or the guy on the internet, check it with Scripture. Be prepared to *chew up the meat and spit out the bones.*

Then Paul writes, *“For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come - all are yours.” And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.* Here is a revolutionary truth! Since we belong to the Sovereign Lord Jesus, then all that belongs to Him belongs to us.

Christianity is about fellowship - both with God *and* other believers. The Greek word translated *“fellowship”* is *“koinonia.”* It means *“to hold all things in common.”*

The blessings of God belong to Christ, Who gives them to us, then we share them with each other.

This means there is no *personal property* or *proprietary information* in the kingdom of God.

Christianity is about sharing not hoarding.

Of course, we don't just live in the kingdom of God. Christians have dual citizenship. We're citizens *of heaven* and *of earth* - which means I have earthly responsibilities - *bills to pay... a family to feed... I can't just give all my money to feed the poor.* We should be wise stewards when it comes to our earthly assets.

Yet Paul's emphasis here is still clear! When and where we can we should share and help each other. **A Christian should be known for sharing, not hoarding...**

And this idea of universal ownership doesn't just extend to Bible teachers, and possessions, and bank accounts - but to ***"the world or life or death, or things present or things to come - all are yours."*** As a Christian *our faith and God's will* encompass all of life.

Author Alan Redpath writes of this passage, **"I love to go out into the country and remember that it is my Father's world, and because it is His, it is mine. I may never own legal title to an inch of it, but it is all mine in the Lord Jesus."** This means every sunset, every snowflake, every rainbow belongs to you. All that belongs to our great God, He shares with His children.

Recently, Kathy and I traveled out west. We visited Yellowstone, and Bryce Canyon. I didn't even know Bryce existed. They call it, "The Little Grand Canyon."

The landscapes there are amazing. They take your breath away. More than once I said proudly, "My Father made this" - as if what I was beholding was a family heirloom. Something that belonged to me. *But it does.*

The beauty of all God's creation... *the wonder of life and the warmth of love...* belong to the believer.

Smell the azaleas in full bloom, touch a newborn, watch a groom kiss his bride - both life and love are yours to enjoy; for you are Christ's and Christ is God's.

But not only does the beauty of life, and love, and nature belong to you - **so does death**. Paul writes emphatically, "*the world or life or death - all are yours.*"

Not only are "*things to come,*" but "*things present*" are (also) yours. God's gifts don't start with "*things to come*" - in the by and by. The painful reality of our here and now - the sufferings of this life - also belong to us.

Pain is as much a part of God's plan, as is the beauty... **The problem is we don't embrace it as such.**

And I'm as guilty as the next guy.

I confess, whenever I'm faced with painful circumstances, my first tendency is to try and minimize my exposure. No one likes to suffer. We all look for ways to relieve, or avoid, or deaden the pain we feel.

People today go to great effort to surround themselves with only positive, happy thoughts. They put up barriers to protect themselves from anything negative. Folks avoid unpleasant feelings at all costs.

Author Lois Cheney writes disparagingly of this very human tendency...

“Feeling blue? Buy some clothes.

Feeling lonely? Turn on the radio.

Feeling despondent? Read a funny book.

Feeling bored? Watch TV.

Feeling empty? Eat a sundae.

Feeling worthless? Clean the house.

Feeling sad? Tell a joke... Ain't this modern age wonderful? You don't gotta feel nothin', there's a substitute for everythin'! God have mercy on us.”

Some folks go to more extremes. They numb their pain with drugs, or food, or booze, or illicit sex.

Other people deal with pain by ignoring it and bottling it up... or taking it out on others... or getting angry at God... The human reaction is to avoid pain.

But there's a better way - **the Christian way.**

And I want to be careful how I say this - because some of you live everyday in chronic pain. And if a cure was made available tomorrow I'd encourage you to avail yourself of it, and praise God for it. At times God does heal us of our sicknesses and alleviates our pain.

Our healing occurs because it brings Him glory.

But God does not promise to heal all our sickness and remove all our pain. Instead, He's taken possession of *"life and death and things present"* - and has transformed the pain from *our enemy* to *our friend*.

Death and suffering now belong to Christ...

And in the absence of His healing, God calls on us to embrace our pain - or... *"to take up our cross."*

God wants us to realize that He uses difficulties and suffering in our lives to mold us and shape us into the image of Jesus. It's God's desire to **redeem** our pain.

Of course, as I've stated this is not the typical human reaction, **but it is the Christian reaction.** A believer believes with Paul that *"the world or life or death, or things present or things to come - all are God's."*

God has a purpose for all things, even evil. He could *remove the suffering from His world, or remove us from this suffering world* - but He does neither.

Rather than remove our pain, God redeems our pain.

Romans 8:28 tells us God kneads our pain together with His comfort, His power, His wisdom. The resulting mixture serves our ultimate good and His eternal glory.

Realize, God didn't cause man to sin, but He knew we would - and He took it into account in His grand plan. In the garden of Eden, before the original sin, Adam and Eve were *innocent - naked and unashamed.*

They didn't know sin, and shame, and death - but neither had they tasted of God's forgiveness, and of His mercies, and of His power to transform their lives.

How could they be truly grateful for His grace?

Realize, God's goal was never *our innocence*, it's *our redemption*. God endures our sin, even its resulting punishment - so we can appreciate His grace, and goodness, and kindness, and mercy for eons to come.

God wants to live eternally, not with *innocent people*, but with *redeemed people* who appreciate His grace.

And this is what God has done in making *“the world and life and death and things present and things to come - all His.”* They are His and now they’re yours.

Don’t run from the pain in your life, embrace it and see what God wants to work through your suffering.

CS Lewis once said, *“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”*

The *“things present”* are yours to waste, or to use.

Even death belongs to the Christian. Death is no surprise to God. It’s not an embarrassing mole on the nose of God’s plan. Yes, death is the result of sin, but if you believe in God’s sovereignty you have no other choice than to consider it part of His grand design.

Like a boxing champ who chooses his next opponent, God picked death to challenge the Savior. A fighter has to have an opponent. It was Christ’s ambition to *go the distance with death, wear him down, knock him out - even redeem death for God’s purpose.*

That's why Paul laughs at and taunts death, later in 1 Corinthians 15:55, "O Death, where is your sting?"

Obviously, Jesus hasn't removed death. It remains.

But He has redeemed it. The evil we called death, is no longer our undertaker. It's now our upper-taker.

Death is now heaven's vestibule. It's the Christian's escalator to the rewards and riches of Jesus. Today, death is no longer our enemy. It's our friend. It's our servant. It belongs to Christ and now it belongs to me.

And I pray, when it's my time, *I'll die like a Christian.*

In his commentary, John Phillips recounts a friend whose wife was dying of cancer. Her pain was severe.

This man had been cruelly told by other Christians that if he'd had enough faith his wife would've been healed. He thought her suffering was his fault...

Phillips told his friend, "One of the things God has given us is death. It is God's gift. It may not be what you are asking Him for. It may not be what you want. Nevertheless, God Himself says it is His gift to us.

Right now death is God's gift to your wife. Death will bring immediate end to her pain. Any moment now she will close her eyes on earth for the last time. She will open them again to look straight into the face of Jesus.

Death is God's gift to her... and it's also God's gift to you, for the Holy Spirit will come to you in a new way. He will help you get on with your life." Phillips said the man dried his eyes, even cracked a slight smile, and got on with his life. *Even death belongs to Jesus!*

Let me close today with a stanza from a old hymn...

"All the way my Savior leads me; what have I to ask beside? Can I doubt His tender mercy, Who through life has been my guide? Heavenly peace, divinest comfort, here by faith in Him to dwell! For I know, whatever befalls me, Jesus doeth all things well."

We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit - let's take that truth seriously. Let's not defile or neglect each other.

Rather than buy into human wisdom, let's recall that God's wisdom appears as foolishness to this world.

And let's remember all things are Christ's - and since we belong to Christ - all things are ours. Both the pleasures and the trials... even life and death.