9-23-18

Ephesians 2:19-22 (2)

In these last few lines of a paragraph that began back in verse 11, Paul is letting his Gentile readers how much better off they are now that they are members of the Christian community. He reassures them (and us) that they are no longer strangers and aliens but true members of Christ’s people. He speaks in ways that give manageable ideas while describing our relation to an infinite God.

Paul gives us three analogies: A Kingdom, an household or family, and a temple. While these are analogies, they are also reality but in ways we can’t completely comprehend. We’ve already talked about our membership in Christ’s Kingdom. Even while we live here on earth, our citizenship is elsewhere. It’s a spiritual citizenship that is none the less real, and one day will be physical in ways we have never experienced. We also looked at a more intimate relationship: that of being children of God. We are actually members of God’s family.

Now let’s turn to the temple. The idea of God’s people being a building of some kind comes up several times in the New Testament and we have to be careful that we don’t try to mash them all together as the same illustration. Each has to be taken in its own context. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:19.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?

Here we have an individual person described as a temple, just one person is the building in which the Holy Spirit dwells. Another example is 1 Corinthians 3:10-13a.

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident.

Now this building can refer to an individual or to a church. Again, we see that church here means a group of Christians and not an actual building. In this analogy, Jesus Christ makes up the entire foundation. The building is then constructed of our works, which will be one day tested.

Paul states specifically in our passages today that the building he is talking about is a temple. Let’s consider what a temple is during this time in history. In general, a temple was a structure for a god to live in. The area had many temples for the pagan gods. They usually contained a statue of the god and it was believed that the deity could actually live there and existed in the statue. The statue, or god, was tended to by the priests. They had to keep it clean and make sure it had food, as well as offer sacrifices to it.

This was all contrary to the God of Israel. The temple for Yahweh represented His presence among His people. The Israelites knew that the temple could not contain their God; the universe could not contain Him. On occasions throughout history, God would show His approval of His people by some manifestation of His presence. Usually, this would be a cloud coming down onto the temple and filling it so that the priests and Levites had to get away form it. The job of the priests was to intercede between God and the people; not to feed Him or take care of Him. God certainly takes care of Himself.

So, from the Christian perspective, the temple is a place for God to dwell. We know that a temple can’t contain Him and that He exists everywhere anyway; But the temple becomes a place where God dwells in a special way. If we consider again 1 Corinthians 6:19, where our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, we see that God actually dwells within us by His Holy Spirit in a special way. He guides us as He would His own child, because that’s what we are. His presence in this way is also a seal to show that we belong to Him and nothing can change that.

Keeping all this in mind, we can simply say that Paul is speaking of a temple as a place for God to dwell. He goes into some detail of the structure itself. He starts at the normal starting place: the foundation. The foundation is the apostles and prophets. Notice, too, that it is past tense; the foundation is laid. And this reference to the apostles and prophets means to their teachings. What was taught by them is the base and foundation of the Christian faith, and anything else is built on their teaching.

Apostles refers to the apostolic office. This would be the twelve and Paul and perhaps a very few others like James, the brother of Jesus. These are the people who had this very particular office bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit. They preached and taught the Gospel, could work miracles, and were taught and appointed by the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. They had the authority to write Scripture. As we’ve mentioned before, this office is no longer existent.

The prophets mentioned here are mostly the New Testament prophets. Certainly, the Old Testament prophets would be part of this; they did teach the people, but their main focus was concerning God’s word for the future of Israel in connection with the world and, more particularly, with the Christ. We don’t read much about the words of the New Testament prophets; what we read is usually in regard to what will happen to someone if they follow a particular course. But their main gift would have been receiving divine revelation about Christian doctrine. With this gift, they would have been able to give proper guidance to their local churches.

This is another office that no longer exists. While the gift of prophecy may still exist, it is limited to seeing some future event or perhaps a special ability to teach and exhort. By the end of the first century, the churches had the writings of the apostles and also their disciples to teach proper doctrine. Today we have our Bible, in which God has revealed everything we need.

It is also instructive, along these lines, to note that the teachings of the apostles and prophets make up the *foundation*. Once a foundation is in place, you don’t go changing it. If you do, it will weaken the structure and it will collapse. And you certainly don’t remove part of the foundation and replace it with something weaker. Note that today, there are church bodies that are run by people who claim the offices of apostle or prophet. Some of them are international in scope and affect hundreds of thousands of people. We need to be aware of these things so that we aren’t taken in by false teachings. Any church led by an “apostle” or “prophet” needs to be avoided.

When someone claims one of these offices, they are claiming direct revelation from God which gives them the authority to add to or take away from Scripture. They are claiming the inadequacy of the Bible. This certainly goes directly against the Bible itself.

Revelation 22:18-19

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

Although these words apply directly to the book of Revelation, they are strategically placed at the end of the Bible; these would have been the last words written that were inspired by the Holy Spirit. They apply to all the inspired Word of God.

Paul points out a special part of the foundation: Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone. As we know, the corner stone would be the most important part of the foundation, and therefore, of the whole temple. The corner stone had to be set perfectly or the whole building would be off. As the corner stone, Jesus aligns the entire temple for God’s dwelling and actually ties it all together.

Jesus is the One who made it possible for the apostles and New Testament prophets to exist. He appointed the apostles and by His gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the prophets received their instruction. Jesus is the One who makes it possible for us to be part of this temple; without Him, we cannot be acceptable to the Father; in other words, as building material. Jesus is the focal point and everything depends on Him.

We need to see widely here: Certainly, Jesus’ teaching is involved in being part of the foundation, in fact, the corner stone. But He is vital in holding it all together. If not for His work on the cross, we could not be a part of it. Keep in mind that we are *in Christ*. Our connection to Him is more than just having Him support us; our very life comes from Him, as the life of a branch comes from the vine. This temple, is a living temple.

It is upon this solid and sure foundation that a holy temple is being built for God to live in, to be among His people. It is built of stones and we are the stones.

1 Peter 2:4-5

And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

As I mentioned before, we have to be careful about mashing together different building metaphors. But we can apply a couple of things here. We are to be stones in the building of God’s temple, both here in the universal church and later in eternity. We are reminded of how our corner stone was rejected by men. But Jesus has become the corner stone of the greatest temple ever built: the temple of God. There is a lesson for us here: If the corner stone was rejected, we who are simply stones in the wall will be too.

Notice that this building is currently being built, it is growing. Our gracious God dwells here now. He condescends to live in an unfinished house. Anyone who has done any remodeling knows what an aggravation that is. Yet here He is, living among His unfinished work, and continuing to work on the building.

There is an important phrase used in verse 21, “Being fitted together”. Recall that we are stones and not bricks. We are not of uniform size and shape. Watch a true stone mason work sometime; how he picks the rock he wants to put in a certain place. Then he shapes the rock with his hammer so it will fit perfectly. Sometimes just chipping a little here and there; sometimes using a big hammer and knocking off a large piece that simply won’t do.

Our Lord is a master stone mason. If we are in His pile of rocks, it is because we have accepted His Son, Jesus. He has the perfect place for us in His church; we just don’t fit right. He uses His hammer to chip away at the rough spots and form us to a proper fit. In our lives this comes from prayer, studying our Bible, worship, fellowship with Christians. Sometimes, we have a large piece that needs to go; for that God pulls out His big hammer. We go through hard times in life that change us. If we cling to God throughout this time, we will be changed for the better. The best news is that our stone mason loves us and each blow of the hammer has our best interests at his heart. This, by the way, is the process of sanctification.

Here’s the thing: this temple, with its sturdy foundation, may be the church while here on earth, but it will be a holy temple for God in heaven. This is ultimately what we are heading for. Our process of sanctification will be complete once we leave the world. Our amazing God has the ability to put us in walls of the church where we can be useful while at the same time still shaping us for perfection. We will be a perfectly shaped stone for use in God’s heavenly temple when we arrive there. This has an important reference in the Old Testament.

The story of Solomon building the temple is in the book of 1 Kings. Stones had to be shaped so they would fit properly in the foundation and anywhere else they were used. This was all done with hand tools.

1 Kings 6:7

The house, while it was being built, was built of stone prepared at the quarry, and there was neither hammer nor axe nor any iron tool heard in the house while it was being built.

We are the stones that come from the quarry of mankind here on the earth. While we are here we are worked by the iron tool of sanctification into the proper shape for the temple building. All the banging and shaping is done here, none will be done in the temple of heaven. The sound of sanctification will not be heard in the temple.

Prayer

O LORD, sometimes the process of being shaped for Your temple is a painful one. It is hard to have a treasured sin broken away from us. It is our nature to cling to this world, our evil hearts long for it and desire what it offers. We are like Lot’s wife, sometimes we look back to worldliness and feel a desire to return to it.

But You, LORD, know the true results of clinging to sin. You know that it is not pretty and pleasurable as it promises to be. You know that it lies. You have complete knowledge of the death, decay, and corruption that lies in sin; You know where it leads to. Because of this perfect knowledge and because of Your perfect love for us, You are willing to put us through anything necessary to free us of sin’s attraction.

We thank You now LORD, for that constant chipping and polishing we endure. We thank You for the hammer blows that free us of the sin that clings to us. Throughout the shaping process, You provide the strength and support and love we need to bring us through. We know that one day we will live with You forever, and everything we have been through will be a distant memory; incomparable to being in the presence of Your glory.

In Jesus’ name we pray

Amen