

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **The Old is in the New Revealed: The House of God**

When I mention the word “house” each of us will have a slightly different image in our minds. Possibly for a few people it will conjure up an image of something quite grand, maybe some of the great country estates of the nobility with dozens of rooms and regal furnishings and servants, but for most of us a house will be something much more modest. Whether the house is small and modest or large and palatial we can often learn a lot about the owner and occupier of the house as we look round it. This is no less true of God’s house! Our talk today continues looking at themes which are developed and built upon from the early chapters of Genesis to the closing chapters of the Bible in the book of Revelation.

So what do you think of when I mention the House of God? Do you still think of the local parish church, uncomfortable wooden pews, draughty and never feeling warm but still with a sense of calm and peace about it? Or maybe you have realised that no man-made building can truly be the “House of God”. I want to quickly move through the Old Testament noticing various references to The “House of God” to see what lessons we can learn in the light of the New Testament.

The first mention of the phrase “House of God” in the Bible is in Genesis 28 although the name “Bethel” which means “House of God” is actually in Genesis 12:8 where we read: “From there [Abraham] moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.” (Genesis 12:8) Immediately we are introduced to the idea of worshipping God and praying to God. Abraham built an altar and acknowledged the grandeur of God.

In Genesis 28, Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, has had to escape from the presence of his father and brother because of his deceit, and tired at the end of a long day, and with no where to stay, finds a suitable sized rock and uses it for his pillow and went to sleep. We read “then [Jacob] dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, ‘I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac’ ... Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.’ And he was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’ So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel” Genesis 28:12-19.

So if Abraham offers sacrifices to God in Bethel, “The House of God”, here we learn that it is where God dwells, and in Jacob’s words “How awesome is this place!” Jacob had a most remarkable sense that he was in the presence of God.

As the Children of Israel travelled through the wilderness, from Egypt to the land of Canaan, a fruitful land which had been first promised to Abraham and reaffirmed to Jacob, God dwelt amongst His people in the Tabernacle, or Tent. God gave to Moses very exact instructions about the construction of this Tabernacle, and the reason for these very precise directions is made clear in the book of Hebrews when the writer explains that the physical tabernacle was actually a pattern or picture of things in the heavens or the spiritual house that God was working towards.

Not only were very exact instructions given to Moses about the construction of the Tabernacle, but also very detailed instruction was given about the articles found in the Tabernacle and the conduct of the priests in and around the Tabernacle. It was where God promised to meet with His people, to dwell amongst them and consequently everything had to be ordered according to God’s requirements not theirs.

Moving on through the Bible we discover that the much-loved King David had a great desire to build a house or Temple to honour God. However because David was a warrior king, a man of war, it was to fall to Solomon, David’s son who succeeded him to the throne of Israel, to have the privilege of building the glorious Temple. It was a truly remarkable edifice; the stones that were used in its construction were so precisely prepared in the quarries that they could just be slotted into place on the Temple Mount. “And the temple, when it was being built, was built with stone finished at the quarry, so that no hammer or chisel or any iron tool was heard in the temple while it was being built.” 1 Kings 6:7. Incredible! Can you imagine a building site like that today?

All these fine stones were overlaid with gold; the Temple must have been truly magnificent. When it was finished, Solomon dedicated the building to God by prayer and by offering thousands of animals as burnt offerings "Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the house. And the priests could not enter into the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD'S house" 2 Chronicles 7:1-2. This is, in many ways, the high point for the nation of Israel. Abraham had built an altar of stones and called the name of the place Bethel; Jacob, Abraham's grandson, had laid his head down on a rock as a pillow and dreamed a dream that led him to exclaim that that place was none other than "the House of God". A large and rather special tent had been the place where God had said that He would dwell, with His people as they travelled through the wilderness and now Solomon had built this magnificent building and the Glory of the LORD had filled it.

But even at this moment Solomon realised that this was not really God's true House. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!" 1 Kings 8:27. The pictures that we have all through the Old Testament point us on towards what God is really working towards, a spiritual house which we are told about in the New Testament. Of course God cannot be contained in a man-made building! But God does want to dwell with mankind and will do so. But as in the Tabernacle everything in God's House must be according to His plan and specification and not ours.

We can read two portions of Scripture in the New Testament that tell us about God's House "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." Ephesians 2:19-22. We will also read "Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 2:4-5. Of course there are several other passages as well as these in the New Testament that make reference to God's House.

What we are being taught is that God does indeed have a house in which He dwells, not a physical house but a spiritual house, and in these two Scriptures we learn its characteristics. We discover that whilst it is a Spiritual House it is altogether a more substantial house, built upon the firmest foundation possible, the Lord Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 28 we read "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation.'" Isaiah 28:16. The Lord Jesus might well have been the stone rejected by the builders in Israel but He was God's chosen foundation, tried and proved to be utterly reliable and also precious beyond measure. He is the foundation stone upon which everything can now depend with no risk of failure. Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God and on this Rock God will build.

But not only is Jesus Christ the foundation stone, He is also the chief corner stone. As I understand it this means that He is the One Who gives shape and character to the building. A master craftsman would prepare the corner stone with extreme care and precision, and then position it with great skill at the corner of the building and all the lines of the building would flow from this one stone. This is a beautiful picture of God's House! We are often concerned as to what we can get in the House of God, but we must never forget that far more important to God is the honour of His Son the Lord Jesus. God is building a house to dwell in, and it is vital to Him that every detail of that house speaks to Him of His Son. His Son was His constant delight before time began and Who else brought such pleasure to God while He walked here in this world?

Jesus Christ is also the top stone in the building. In Zechariah we read "And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'" Zechariah 4:7. God is still building at this moment, adding stone upon stone, but soon when the building is complete the Cap Stone will be put in place, Jesus Christ Himself is the Chief Corner Stone, He alone must catch the eye and have all the glory.

But we also learn about the building blocks that are being used in the construction of the spiritual house. Of course they are not blocks at all but what Peter describes as 'living stones', "...you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house" 1 Peter 2:5. We learn that we have the same nature as the foundation stone. He, Jesus Christ is the Living Stone, we, as believers on Him, are "living stones" - not dead and inanimate, but possessed of life, new life, eternal life through His gracious work at Calvary and His resurrection from among the dead.

You will notice that God doesn't use bricks! It takes a great deal of skill and patience to construct a building from rocks of all different shapes and sizes. Way back in Genesis 11 at Babel, when mankind first began to build on a grand scale, we read that they said, "Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar." Genesis 11:3. God isn't squeezing us all into one mould, making us all the same size and shape. This might be what man likes, boring uniformity, but God works with stones, not bricks. We are all different, different sizes, different shapes, maybe we could even be described at an awkward size or shape! But God has the

skill and patience to fashion us and use us in just the right place in His building; and if a true believer on the Lord Jesus, each of us is vital in the building He is making. No child of God is unimportant or replaceable.

But you will remember that in the construction of Solomon's magnificent Temple, the work was carried out quietly, without any noise. The stones were quarried, hewn and shaped with absolute precision, and fitted into the building. These details are not included in the Old Testament description of the building work by chance. God is painting a picture of the way He will work in the construction of His Masterpiece, His spiritual House, in the New Testament. God the Holy Spirit is working today, all over the world, as it were quarrying out living stones, men, women and children who have trusted the Lord Jesus as Saviour, and shaping them to fit perfectly into God's House - Just the right shape, just the right character, just the right size at just the right time!

I hope you are enjoying this as much as I am! It is wonderful to catch a glimpse of God's worldwide work. We often see a fragmented, broken church, but here we have something grand, comprehensive and complete! A poet has written about it as follows:

*See the vast building, view it rise,  
The work how great! The plan how wise!  
Oh wondrous fabric, power unknown!  
That rears it on the "Living Stone!"*

*In Him it is ordained to raise,  
A Temple to the Father's praise,  
Composed of all the saints who own,  
No Saviour but the "Living Stone".*

So what is the function and purpose of this building? All through the Bible we learn here and there details that serve to answer this question. In the book of Revelation we read "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." Revelation 4:11. There are two points to make in relation to this verse. The first is that God is the Supreme Creator and He is worthy to be praised! We sometimes fail to recognise this. We are often thankful for His care and guidance in our lives, we should be deeply grateful for the salvation He has provided for us at immense personal cost, but we should also acknowledge that He is the Almighty God and Creator of everything and therefore is deserving of our praise. I think that when we read at the beginning of this talk about the experiences of Abraham and Jacob that this is what they had learnt. They both had built an altar and called on the name of the LORD. If you remember Jacob said "How awesome is this place!" It was the House of God!

But also this verse in Revelation tells us not only that God created all things, but that they were created for His pleasure. This is amazing! God actually takes pleasure in the company of His creature, man. In all the various pictures of the House of God in the Old Testament we sense time and again that God desires to dwell with His people. In almost the last chapter of the Bible we can read "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. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." Revelation 21:3-4. God desires your company and mine. Do I desire His? David writing in Psalm 84 "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, And the swallow a nest for herself, Where she may lay her young - Even Your altars, O LORD of hosts, My King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will still be praising You." Psalm 84:1-4.

Peter also calls us "His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light" 1 Peter 2:9. Another translation reads "that ye might set forth the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness to his wonderful light" 1 Peter 2:9. It emphasises the fact that those who form part of God's House and family have the privilege and responsibility to share with all around the "excellencies" of the Lord Jesus, the One Who has saved us and called us out of darkness into God's marvellous light.

In the well known story of the runaway son in Luke's Gospel, sometimes called the "Prodigal Son" when the lad comes to his senses he recalls that in his father's house there was "bread enough and to spare" (Luke 15:17) whilst he was perishing from hunger. This is also a feature of God's House. Quoting yet another of King David's Psalms we read "They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures." Psalm 36:8. So often today we are left dissatisfied, life very rarely delivers all we expect or want. Yet the promise of the Word of God is that those who are in the House of God will be "abundantly satisfied". If we change the focus of our lives from what is material and temporary to what is of concern to God and spiritual there is the potential to live a deeply satisfied life. The Apostle Paul, writing from a Roman prison said "I have all, and abound: I am full"

Philippians 4:18. Jesus said "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." John 6:35.

But there is also another consideration and that is again found in the Psalms: "Your testimonies are very sure; Holiness adorns Your house, O LORD, forever." Psalm 93:5. You and I have every right to control and order what goes on in our houses, but so does God! Holiness is a word that seems to be completely at odds with the world we live in today. If the 1960's marked the end of a lot of the recognised values and the beginning of the permissive society, where are we now morally some fifty years later? We have most definitely arrived at the point described in Isaiah where there are not only those who call good evil, but also call what is evil good. Isaiah 5:20. But God's House rules haven't changed with the centuries! He is a Holy God and He expects His people to be holy as well. "But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'" 1 Peter 1:15-16.

The Apostle Paul, writing to his young friend Timothy was instructing him "so that you might know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." 1 Timothy 3:15. Paul then goes on to speak about the "mystery of godliness", the wonder of a truly pious life. God still expects absolute honesty and integrity in His children and He wants us to exhibit the love and grace that He Himself displayed in the Lord Jesus.

Later, in the second letter that Paul wrote to Timothy he uses the picture of a great house and the various utensils that would be in the house "But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these, [the sin and iniquity Paul had mentioned earlier] he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work" 2 Timothy 2:20-21. The clear teaching is that we have to be clean to be useful to our Lord. "Be clean, you who bear the vessels of the LORD." Isaiah 52:11.

Paul, in writing to Timothy, had described the House of God, as "the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." 1 Timothy 3:15. The spiritual house God is building, composed of all true Christians is here described as a memorial pillar. Inscribed for all to see with the truth of God, and firmly grounded upon that same truth. As such it cannot be subject to the changing whims and fancies of contemporary belief and thought. We change, society's standards change, but God does not change and His truth remains inviolate. The House of God must be the place where the truth of God is adhered to and defended whatever the cost in ridicule or persecution.

So fellow Christian, you and I are part of something unimaginably grand! Whatever place you occupy at the moment, whether or not you perceive it to be important or insignificant you are a 'living stone' in God's House. It is the place in which God now dwells through His Holy Spirit. We have the privilege of offering "spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" 1 Peter 2:5. Speaking to God about the preciousness and worth of His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus and then in turn we also have the responsibility of showing "forth the excellencies of Him Who has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light". Telling to others around us the blessing and salvation we have received in the Lord Jesus, not only in the words we use but also in the lives we live.

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