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GOD OWNS YOUR CHURCH!

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chaps 40-44

Extracts:

In the visions of God He took me into the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain; on it toward the south was something like the structure of a city. ...He brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple; so I looked, and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord; and I fell on my face. And the Lord said to me, "Son of man, mark well, see with your eyes and hear with your ears, all that I say to you concerning all the ordinances of the house of the Lord and all its laws. Mark well who may enter the house and all who go out from the sanctuary [Ezek. 40: 2; 44: 4-5]

Recently, I had cause to withdraw some money from my bank account. I walked towards the ATM machine only to discover that I had forgotten at home my wallet that contained my ATM card and other vital documents. Since the cash machine was in the premises of the branch of the bank where I do most of my transactions, I walked confidently to one of the officials who knew me quite well. I told him my situation and he replied firmly, "I can't help you unless you come with your ATM card or a check (cheque) with your ID card!"

The money in the bank was mine but I could not access it because I needed to meet the requirements of the bank which I did not own. It was immaterial that I knew some of the officials of that bank. As long as I had not met the requirements, I could not do business with that bank that moment. We face a comparable situation when we go to the church where we worship. It is true that we the members may have contributed the resources with which it was built. It may be that we are high ranking members, serving as pastors or priests or committee members. But if Christ is the head of the church that is also His body [Eph. 5: 23, 30], does that not make Him the owner? Should the owner of the body not have the prerogative to determine what the body needs or abhors? Why do we behave as landlords of our churches, determining and applying rules and practices that may in most times contradict the word of God? Who in deed owns your place of worship?

In today's lesson, God took the prophet Ezekiel in visions to Jerusalem to show him in details the structure and desirable conduct in the house of the Lord. Let us learn some lessons that will guide us to worship in God's house in spirit and in truth.

1. God's purpose for the visions of His earthly temple

Today's story took place in the 25th year of the exile of the children of Israel in Babylon and on the 14th anniversary of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. In a series of visions, the Lord had before then shown the prophet what would befall the children of Israel after their seventy-year exile and dispersal, and how He would ultimately restore them to a united prosperous nation. In today's story, God took Ezekiel in Spirit from Babylon and brought him to the land of Israel. There, Ezekiel saw a man (certainly an angel from his appearance) with a measuring rod. The man said to Ezekiel, "Look with your eyes and hear with your ears, and fix your mind on *everything* I show you; for you were brought here so that I might show them to you. *Declare to the house of Israel everything you see.*" Then he proceeded to give the prophet details about the temple [Ezek. 40: 1-4].

As in our other recent studies, we shall pay attention to the principles and themes that apply to the modern church and believers, not necessarily the bigger picture that relates specifically to the nation of Israel. It is instructive that each time God speaks of His temple, He is very detailed and specific. For example, when He spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai, He was specific on the structure and furnishing of the Tabernacle, priestly garments and offerings [Ex. Chaps 25-31]. He even went as far as naming the artisans that He had filled with the Spirit to assist Moses to make all the designs and structures [Ex. 31: 1-11].

God commanded Ezekiel to "describe the temple to the house of Israel, *that they may be ashamed of their iniquities*; and let them measure the pattern, and if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple and its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, all its forms and all its laws. Write it down in their sight, so that they may keep its whole design and all its ordinances, and perform them" [Ezek. 43: 10-11].

The greatest danger to true worship is ignorance. That is why, speaking through the prophet Hosea, God has told us, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" [Hos. 4: 6]. Jacob was on his way to his mother, Rebekah's people. At Bethel, he laid his head on a stone and fell asleep. Then, he dreamt of a ladder that stretched from the earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. Above the ladder stood the Lord who spoke to him. When Jacob woke up, he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, *and I did not know it.*" Suddenly, he became afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! *This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!*" [Gen. 28: 12-17].

We know that the first covenant had "ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary" [Heb. 9: 1] that were a shadow of Christ, "the Mediator of the new covenant" [v. 15]. You will recall that after Jesus had cast out traders and money changers from the temple, the Jews asked Him to show them a sign for doing what He had done. He told them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Furious but perplexed, the Jews retorted, "It has taken forty-six years

to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” Actually, “He was speaking of the temple of His body” [Jn 2: 14-21]. Can you imagine how much differently worshippers would behave in the house of God if they knew where they were? Therefore, as true believers, we need to know more details about the temple of the Lord; we need to know more about Christ for “no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed” [1 Cor. 12: 3].

2. Details of the visions to Ezekiel

Here are some of the details that God made known to Ezekiel:

a) *The temple was on a holy mountain*

God told Ezekiel, “The whole area surrounding the mountain is most holy” [Ezek. 43: 12]. In other words, it is not only the temple but its surrounding grounds that are holy. When Moses approached the burning bush in Horeb, “the mountain of God,” the Lord warned him, “Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground” [Ex. 3: 4-5]. Later, after Moses had led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and brought them to the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, God warned the people, “Take heed to yourselves that you do not go up to the mountain or touch its base. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death” [Ex. 19: 12]. Just before the capture of Jericho by Joshua and his army, he came face to face with “the Commander of the Lord’s army” who told Joshua, “Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy” [Josh. 5: 15]. So, the ground on which the temple of God stands is also holy. In Jerusalem, the temple dwelt on Mount Zion. Because of that, the Lord of hosts dwells there [Is. 8: 18].

Some churches have been built on lands that they do not legally own nor are they attempting to legitimize their occupancy. For example, in the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja (Nigeria), several churches have been pulled down by state authorities because they were illegal structures. Would you call that religious persecution, as some of such churches have alleged? If you put your church building on stolen land, would you call such grounds holy? Also, out of economic exigencies, some churches hold their Sunday worship sessions in hotel rooms that are used for ungodly activities during the week. Would you call such grounds holy?

b) *The structure was described in detail*

Quite meticulously, the angel with the measuring rod showed Ezekiel the structure of the temple with specific measurements. It consisted of the following sub-structures:

- **The Outer Court [Ezek. 40: 5-27; 42: 1-14]**
This was marked by a wall all around the temple, with gates in the four directions [east, west, south, north]. That is analogous to the legal boundaries of your church premises. It may be marked by a fence or wall. As soon as you come into the outer court, you have stepped on holy grounds. You must behave reverentially because “the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him” [Hab. 2: 20]. Therefore, it is not a place for gossip or backbiting!
- **The Inner Court [Ezek. 40: 28-47]**
Gateways from the four directions ushered you into the inner court where the sacrifice tables were laid out and the chambers of the priests that took charge of the temples were situated. In the modern church, the inner court would include the administrative and residential blocks within the church premises as well as places for meetings and social events. Since they are an integral part of the temple, such places should also be used with reverence.
- **The Temple Porch [Ezek. 40: 48-49]**
This is a kind of covered entrance leading into the temple proper with steps leading to it. It serves to remind you that you are already in the temple.
- **The Temple itself [Ezek. 41: 1-26]**
The angel brought Ezekiel to the sanctuary and told him that beyond the sanctuary was “the Most Holy Place.” In the tabernacle shown to Moses on Mount Sinai, the sanctuary was the first part of the temple and it consisted of the lamp stand, the table and the showbread. The second part, veiled from the rest of the temple, was called the “Holiest of All” and had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant [Ex. 36: 30-35; 40: 1; Heb. 9: 1-4]. In the modern church, the sanctuary and beyond would consist of the altar area where the ministers and the choir stay. As in Ezekiel’s time, it also represents the most holy place in the church.

Under the old covenant, only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place beyond the veil. Every year, he went with the blood of sacrificial animals to atone for his and the sins of the people. Under the new covenant, Jesus the High Priest shed His own blood to atone for our sins [Heb. 9: 7-15]. The veil of the temple has been removed [Matt. 27: 51] and all worshippers (whether in the inner court or temple porch or the temple proper) can now see it all. But does that now give you the license to trivialize the Most Holy Place? In deed, many churches have erected their own veils

of righteousness just to make their worship centres user-friendly instead of being God-fearing. Does God own such churches?

c) *The Glory of God returned to the Temple*

As Ezekiel was being brought into the temple gate that faced toward the east, the glory of the Lord came into and filled the whole temple. God said to the prophet, “Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel *forever*. No more shall the house of Israel defile My holy name, they nor their kings, by their harlotry” [Ezek. 43: 1-7]. The experience so dazed Ezekiel that he fell on his face [v. 3; 44: 4].

You may recall that at the dedication of the temple built by King Solomon, the glory of God (*Shekinah*) was also manifested. Here is how the Scriptures capture it [2 Chron. 5: 13-14]:

In deed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord, saying: 'For he is good' for His mercy endures forever, ' that the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.

It is instructive that Solomon’s dedication prayer followed after the glory of the Lord had appeared in the temple. Therefore, when the king knelt down and spread his hands towards the altar, he was speaking to the living God on the throne in His holy house, not to the man-made carvings decorating the temple!

When last did you go to your church and came away with the impression that you had had a close encounter with God? When last did you feel that the service was Spirit-led? We complain when the service appears long. We are too much in a hurry to go home and yet we always come late! But to what or where are we rushing? Can you hurry out of your job or business like that? Can you leave the presence of your boss when s(he) has not permitted you? Why then do we trash God and expect Him to treasure us?

3. Implications for true worship

God commanded Ezekiel to “mark well” with his eyes and ears all that the Lord would say to him “concerning all the ordinances of the house of the Lord and all its laws, ... who may enter the house and all who go out from the sanctuary”

[**Ezek. 44: 5**]. For example, with respect to priests, God commanded, “No priest shall drink wine when he enters the inner court,” and priests “shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern the unclean and the clean” [**vv. 21, 23**].

Speaking on the subject of church leadership, Paul wrote to Timothy that a bishop “must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence” [**1 Tim. 3: 1-4**]. The same rule of spiritual discipline applies to deacons [**vv. 8-10; 12-13**] and wives [**v. 11**] and, in deed, the whole flock. The word of God says, “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? (It is) he who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully” [**Ps. 24: 3-4**].

If God is so clear on what He wants to see done in His own house, why is there so much gap between precept and practice? Why are church rules that promote godliness never enforced by those in authority to do so? Why is there a tendency to cover up evil practices against the flock by the clergy? Why are church appointments and promotions increasingly more political than spiritual? Why are churches run as one-person businesses that are passed from father to son or husband to wife? Why does it seem easier to see the political head of a country than to have audience with the pastor of a church? Why is so much more emphasis placed on prosperity than salvation? Why do denominations so jealously guard their turfs as if their members alone will go to heaven?

4. Conclusion: God owns the church!

The Psalmist says, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord’” [**Ps. 122: 1**]. In a show of triumphant faith, David said, “One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: *that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple. For in the day of trouble, He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle*” [**Ps. 27: 4-5**]. Therefore, it is God that owns the church, not those who hold the keys or the purse of the church building.

Can you say that of your place of worship?