

“God’s Blueprint for Holiness”

Introduction: As we embarked upon our building expansion and renovation some twenty years or so ago now, the architect created not only a set of blueprints for us, but also an overall vision of what the project would look like when it was all done. I remember that this picture provided great encouragement to us as we both used it in our fund-raising materials, as well as simply gazed upon it each time we came into the church. Any time you are seeking to bring about major changes, be it in a building, or even in your life, it is extremely helpful to have a vision of where you are heading.

In the final eight chapters of the work of the prophet Ezekiel (which we’ll be considering this week and next), God gives his people such a vision. Like all the other strange visions we’ve been hearing about in our journey with this OT prophet, from a divine chariot with strange chauffeurs and multiple wheels, to a valley of dead and dry bones, this one, too, can seem puzzling to our eyes and ears. It’s puzzling because worship and life centered around a temple, as well as the flying around of something called God’s glory, is simply not part of our experience! But God intended all of this not only to be incredibly encouraging to His people who were still living in exile in Babylon, but also as a means to continue to teach his people about holiness, both His and theirs. If we can see how this blueprint points toward the coming of the glory who is Jesus, and the temple that will be God’s new creation—the new Jerusalem—it will be of great encouragement and instruction to us as well. For the word of God that came to the Israelites, “Be holy, because I am holy,” comes to us as well (1 Pe. 1:15).

I. A Virtual Temple Tour (chs. 40-42)

A. It’s worth taking a few moments as we begin to think about how God has been present to his people up to this point in their relationship. In the beginning there was no temple, just a garden. Adam and Even could meet with God anywhere and everywhere because all was holy. But sin changed everything. Because of his holiness God cannot tolerate or ignore sin so special locations became required in order for people to meet with God. The first locations were called altars, constructed for sacrifice and prayer. Then, as God led his people through the wilderness after their rescue from slavery Egypt, he instructed them to build the tabernacle, a portable and mobile tent in which he would meet them that folded up and traveled with them. Following their settlement in the Promised Land, the construction of a temple in Jerusalem replaced this portable temple and became the primary location for meeting with God, the place for worship and sacrifice.

B. “Glory” has also been a critical term. I’ve talked about this glory as representing the sum of God’s character, his beauty and justice and righteousness and perfection. God’s glory is also used to describe the visible manifestation of his Presence with his people. It was often experienced as a cloud that filled the temple. However, as we saw in an earlier vision, Ezekiel not only saw the glory/presence of God depart from the Temple, he also witnessed the destruction of the Temple and the holy city of Jerusalem. Where and how would God be present to his people now?

C. So, as chapter 40 begins, the last, and the climactic, vision that the Spirit of God gave Ezekiel begins to unfold. We read that it came in the twenty-fifth year of life in exile in Babylon for God's people (573 BC), which, by this time, I would imagine, had begun to wear rather thin and become highly discouraging! Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed for some fourteen years now and it doesn't seem like much had been heard from God since then. Certainly, as far as the people could tell, no dead and dry bones had begun to come to life (cf. 37:1-14). We get frustrated when it seems like we haven't heard from God for several days; can you imagine feeling such for several years?!

D. But God did not remain silent. In his final vision for the prophet, God took Ezekiel back to Jerusalem and gave him a bird's eye view of the Temple, of a new Temple, of a Temple that looked like a city (v. 2). In the vision, Ezekiel was met by a divine tour-guide who proceeded to give him what we might think of as a three-dimensional, computer generated, virtual-reality tour of this magnificent structure. This angelic guide has with him a measuring rod and a linen cord, all of which were a part of the intent to show Ezekiel how symmetrically designed and beautifully built this structure was as Ezekiel is led through various courtyards, gateways, and enclosures, starting from the outer wall and moving inward toward increasing levels of holiness and the inner altar. This was to help God's people know that this holy and righteous God had not abandoned them but would be dwelling, once more, among them. This would be the place of his throne, and the place for the soles of his feet (43:7).

II. Radiant Glory (43:1-12)

A. At the end of chapter 42, then, the structure of the new temple has been laid out for Ezekiel. But it is empty. In many ways, it takes us back to the creation account in Genesis which begins with the formation of various spaces or kingdoms—the sky, the waters, and the dry ground—and then describes how those spaces are filled with kings or rulers. So here does Ezekiel then see, in the next part of his vision, how this Temple is to be filled. God himself would fill it, returning in the way he had left, through the eastern gate (Ex. 10:19; 11:22-23). Ezekiel was taken there by his tour guide. There he heard a sound like the roar of rushing waters and saw the glory of God coming from the east, then the land becoming radiant with God's glory, and then that glory filling the temple. What a remarkable and powerful and heartwarming picture than must have been! The closest I can come to imagining it is to think about a sunrise.

Illustration: I still have a particular one in mind, actually. It came a couple of spring-times ago when, on a very early New Hampshire morning, I was sitting looking east, out at the mountains and a field, awaiting the sunrise. As I waited, I could hear in the background the roar of water still rushing out of the hills from the joining of melting snow with spring rain. And this text from Ez. 43 was the OT text for that day from the daily office in the Book of Common Prayer. As the sun came up, the land did indeed seem like it was becoming radiant with God's glory as the light from the sunrise spread out before me. And if we can understand God's creation as being his cosmic temple, which the creation account in Genesis can be seen to be describing, with heaven as God's throne and earth as his footstool (Isa. 66:1-2), then God was indeed filling his temple with his glory on that particular morning, as one could argue, he does every morning the sun comes up again.

Psalm 19 gives us a similar kind of description: "In the heavens God has pitched a tent (cf. tabernacle) for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber," seeking his beloved and bringing warmth to all things (19:4-5). A couple of stanzas of a poem by Mary Oliver, "Why I Wake Early" also captures the God drenched glory of a sunrise:

Hello sun in my face, Hello, you who make the morning
and spread it over the fields and into the faces of the tulips and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the miserable and the crotchety—

best preacher that ever was, dear star, that just happens to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness, to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light—good morning, good morning, good morning.

B. Of course, if you've ever watched a sunrise, you know that you can't keep looking at it for very long or else your eyes will start to burn! It's a powerful part of creation that can serve as reminder of the holiness of God. He is so perfect and pure, as that temple vision sought to communicate, that we cannot be in his presence without his grace. And so, as well as serving as an encouragement to God's people that God would be dwelling among them again, the perfections of this temple structure, as they considered its arrangements, exits, entrances, regulations and laws, along with the brilliance of the glory that filled it, were to remind God's people how far short of his glory they had fallen in the past. As we often say prior our prayer of confession, it is as we consider God's goodness that we are able and moved to recognize where we come up short of that goodness. In this case, the people were to be reminded of their prostitution—their worship of other gods, and a rather strange practice they had of worshipping dead kings. In the end, if they wanted God to hang around this time, there must be permanent changes in their behavior. They would need to radiate his glory through repentance and faithful living.

C. This point is reinforced as we think about how the temple in this vision is different from the other dwellings God has called his people to make. In fact, this one contains not one command for God's people to build anything, nor does it contain a list of materials, nor are there any measurements concerning height, just length and width. Further, when the exiles did finally return to Jerusalem, this is not the "blueprint" that they used to try and rebuild their temple. Finally, if this temple has something to do with God's new creation, as described in Revelation 21-22, it is significant that there, John, in the vision he is given of the New Jerusalem, notices that it contains no temple. Why? Because the whole thing is temple, the whole of God's new creation, just like the Garden of Eden, is the place where God is wholly, and holy, present. "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev. 21:22).

D. So, there was something different, other than a structure, that this temple vision seemed to be conveying. The blueprint, we find, had nothing to do with the construction of a building but the construction of lives. For what we see as we follow the trail of God's glory into the NT is that the location where God would meet with his people, the place where his glory would dwell has shifted, from a place to a person, from the temple that was a building to the temple that is the body of Christ. As John wrote, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (lit. "tabernacled") among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). It is as we consider this glory that we're led not only to see where we fall short of his glory, but through him receive forgiveness of that sin because the "temple" of Jesus is now both the place, and the means, of sacrifice. Further, as Paul explains to the church in Corinth, "And we all...beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another" (2 Co. 3:18; Ps. 48). In other words, as we contemplate the glory of God revealed to us in Jesus, as we consider his perfections and his beauty, as the temple of the Lord, we can begin to experience the kind of transformation that will radiate God's glory to a world in desperate need of his light. We can be(come) holy as he is holy.

