

BUILDERS FOR GOD

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CHAPTER ONE: MOSES, THE FAITHFUL PATTERN FOLLOWER (JAMES NEEDHAM)

It takes a team of experts to bring the vision of a designer into a completed reality. From the moment the architect draws up the first plan until the surveyor finally certifies completion of a building, engineers, planning consultants, quantity surveyors, contractors and lawyers all play a part using their expertise. It can be a long and complicated process, and will only be a success if the whole team works together to agree the process and construct the building - all in line with the plans and specification.

It is a very different picture when God commissions His servants to build something for Him. When God called on Pharaoh to 'let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness' (Ex.7:16), He had in view a building which the children of Israel would construct for Him and which would be central to their service as God's holy nation. No team of experts would be required to input into the plans, for this building had a great design and a supreme Designer, one admired by Abraham who himself looked forward to a future work by the same Architect (Heb.11:10). In this wilderness building, God would be the Architect, the Designer and the Occupier; its design and composition were by Him and for Him. The responsibility for overseeing the work of building it was placed into the hands of one man prepared for the task: Moses.

Commissioned for the Work

As Israel camped at the foot of Sinai, Moses mediated between God and His people (Deut.5:4-5). There in the mountain, Moses

received from God the promise to Israel of covenant relationship (Ex.19:5-6), and the Law to regulate that relationship, to which they pledged their obedience (Ex.24:3,7). The covenant having been confirmed by the sprinkling of the blood of sacrifice (Ex.24:8), God called Moses to return to the mountain, where he waited for six days. It was on the seventh day, perhaps the day that spoke of divine rest (Gen.2:2), that God began to tell Moses of a building essential to the covenant, in which He would find His rest amongst His people (Ex.24:16).

It was there that God expressed to Moses His desire to have a dwelling-place in the midst of His chosen people: 'let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them' (Ex.25:8). The instructions Moses received for the building of the Tabernacle, and for the clothing and consecration of the priests who would serve in it, were precise and complete. The design and pattern for the building were all of God, and Moses was to oversee the work in strict conformity with what God had revealed: 'see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain' (Ex.25:40).

The singular importance of this principle is confirmed in its repetition to Moses on two further occasions (Ex.26:30; 27:8), and its reference by the Holy Spirit a further three times throughout the Scriptures (Num.8:4; Acts 7:44; Heb.8:5). When it came to God's design for His house, there was no room either for human intervention or variation. God had drawn up the plans; Moses' task was to ensure that the building met the pattern in every detail. And to make certain that in no part of the work would Moses have to apply his own interpretation, not only was the pattern described to Moses but it was also physically shown to him: 'our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen' (literally 'seen with his eyes', 'stared at') (Acts 7:44).

Moses' Faithful Service

Moses knew the importance and the care with which these instructions were to be handled. Although he had experienced God speaking to him 'face to face, as a man speaks to his friend' (Ex.33:11), Moses did not allow any sense of familiarity to impede the humble and reverent obedience demanded by the God of the house of God (Gen.31:13), before whom even Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling" (Heb.12:21). It was in this spirit of faithful service that Moses oversaw the work of construction, ensuring that the artisans of Israel should channel the use of their gifts to accomplish not what was in their own minds, but only what God had designed and revealed: "I have put wisdom in the hearts of all who are gifted artisans, that they may make all that I have commanded you ... According to all that I have commanded you they shall do" (Ex.31:6,11).

Moses carried out his commission, overseeing a work which satisfied God in every respect (Ex.39:32,42-43). God's appreciation of Moses' faithfulness was demonstrated on the first new year's day since the children of Israel had left their bonds in Egypt, when, as the Tabernacle was reared up, the divine endorsement of the work was given as "the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Ex.40:34).

The Importance of the Pattern

Why was careful compliance with God's revealed pattern so important? The writer to the Hebrews gives the reason: the Tabernacle constructed under Moses' supervision was "the copy and shadow of the heavenly things ... the sanctuary and ... the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man" (Heb.8:5,2; 9:11,23). The connection made at the house of God between heaven and earth, having first been revealed to Jacob at Bethel in

the great revelation of the fundamental principles associated with God's house (Gen.28:12,17), was maintained in the Tabernacle, for what Moses was building was to reflect on earth a dwelling-place which already existed, created by the divine hand in heaven.

An Application for Today?

So Moses' faithfulness to God's pattern was rewarded as the glory of the Lord filled the building, and was ratified by his commendation as a servant 'faithful in all His house' (Num.12:7; Heb.3:5). Is there still an application of Moses' faithfulness to be found today in believers on the Lord Jesus Christ seeking to serve Him in the way He desires? The answer must be an emphatic, "Yes!" as we turn to Hebrews again for the remarkable statement that the Tabernacle, with its priesthood and services, was "symbolic for the present time" (Heb.9:9). The record of Moses' faithfulness is no mere history recorded for curiosity's sake; it is a record of the faithfulness of a man in the service of God, faithfulness to be replicated in His servants today who seek to serve Him in the place where He dwells.

God's house today is no longer a physical dwelling-place, it is a house made up of believers on the Lord Jesus Christ gathered together to be built up according to God's design having as chief cornerstone, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (1 Pet.2:5-6). He, by His person and teaching (embodied in the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor.14:37), gives the divine standard to which the entire structure must relate and the blueprint to which those seeking to emulate Moses must build. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, spoke of their having "obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered" (Rom.6:17). In the original language, the word 'form' means a mould – it was as if they had been poured into the apostles' teaching, known also as 'the Faith', having their characters and service shaped by it to fit them for service in God's house according to His design.

As in the days of the Old Covenant, God still has His design for the place where He dwells. It is the only design, and He looks for people willing to build faithfully according to the pattern revealed from heaven, unblemished by human interpretation. Listening to the one who is faithful as a Son over God's house (Heb.3:6), may we strive to conform to the pattern of teaching 'once for all delivered' (Jude v.3) that, as servants like Moses, we too may be accounted by God 'good and faithful' (Matt.25:21).

(Bible quotations from NKJV)

For further study:

1. What significance is there in the fact that God 'dismisses' his creation of the stellar heavens in a couple of words, but devotes chapter upon chapter to the construction details of the small portable structure known as the tabernacle? What is the present-day impact of stating no less than six times that it was according to the pattern?

2. Why was the building of the tabernacle essential to the covenant of Exodus 19-24?

3. Later, Psalm 132 shows how seriously David entered into God's desire for Zion. How can we show we are taking God's desire for a dwelling place as seriously as Moses (Ex.25:8) and David (Ps.132)?

4. How are we to replicate Moses' faithfulness?

CHAPTER TWO: BEZALEL AND OHOLIAB (MARTIN JONES)

Clue: If this object was available for auction today, market value and ‘wow factor’ would rival such treasures as the Mona Lisa and the Crown Jewels.

Clue: This historical object has been almost mythologized and a fictional quest to find it has been made famous in film.

Clue: An African tribe even claims to have guarded this object obsessively for thousands of years.

If you haven’t already guessed, we are talking about the Ark of the Covenant. A trickier puzzle, were it not for the title of this article, would be to name the makers of this Ark, and many other objects in the tabernacle as well; but no prizes for guessing. It was, of course, Bezalel and Oholiab. You can read all about their building project in Exodus chapters 35-38. What can we learn from these relatively obscure men and how they got the job done?

It’s hard to overstate the importance of the task that these men undertook: God Himself would either dwell in what they produced or else would be served through it. You might expect perhaps that such a task would fall to someone of ‘Hebrews 11 calibre’, even Moses himself, but not so.

Both men were plucked from obscurity and seemed to have quickly returned to it – and their lineage also reinforces an important lesson. One was from Judah, the kingly tribe; but the other was from Dan – in Jewish tradition the lowest of all the tribes. Heritage or pedigree in this instance was seemingly of no

consequence to God in selecting His servants and, thankfully, that holds true right through to today. Not many of the Corinthian church were noble and Paul was quick to discount the value of his background for Christ; we're also told that God is no respecter of persons. Jesus' disciples included fishermen, revolutionaries and despised tax collectors. He can, and will, use anyone He chooses.

The meaning of their names might indicate what God saw in them. Bezalel means 'in the shadow of God' – and to be in the shadow of something requires closeness. Oholiab means 'the tent or tabernacle of my father' which might emphasize an appreciation of the importance of God's dwelling place. Are you close to God and do you care about where He lives? If you are and if you do, then you can be a builder for God today!

Filled with the Holy Spirit

The key factor, though, is that both men were filled with the Holy Spirit (Ex.35:31) to enable them to do this work. Unlike believers from Pentecost to the present day, in Old Testament times this filling – and instances when the Holy Spirit came upon individuals – was a temporary phenomenon for a specific period for a specific task, or tasks – and it seems that the individual had no control over the filling. We're commanded in Ephesians 5 to be filled with the Spirit, and the meaning there is to be filled continually - which is now made a possibility because all believers are indwelt permanently by the Holy Spirit from the point of salvation (see Rom.8:9).

What does it really mean to be filled with the Spirit? Irrespective of era, we see from God's Word, that the filling both controls and empowers the individual to do things that could not possibly be done alone, and, as in Bezalel and Oholiab's case, always with the overall objective of glorifying God. Contrary to common belief it is not typified by an emotional or impressive

outward manifestation. An important question is whether we can really function effectively as Christians, and collectively as churches, without being filled with the Spirit? Our two friends and other examples suggest to us that the clear answer is, “No”.

Noah was told by God to build a big boat and given a pattern to follow. It’s perhaps surprising to us that the Bible doesn’t specifically say that Noah was filled with the Spirit to accomplish it – we can guess he would have appreciated the help in such a massive undertaking! But it perhaps allows us to make the point that, although the pattern was obediently followed to the letter without an explicit filling of the Spirit, the result (though vital in itself) was by nature a temporary dwelling that was fit for man. It was not a place ready for God to live in. In other words, since the ark was not designed for God to live in, there was no explicit mention of the filling of the Spirit.

With Bezalel and Oholiab though, we read about both the pattern they were given to follow in making the tabernacle furniture and also the filling of the Spirit. The Spirit enabled the pattern to be followed perfectly and skilfully, thereby creating a place God was happy to call home. Being filled with the Spirit and following God’s pattern – the two must go hand in hand.

The Lesson for Today

There is a lesson for today for believers who collectively desire to be a place where God lives and to glorify God by their service. They need to be sure that they are diligently seeking to follow the pattern for collective service laid out in God’s Word; not by vain repetition or living blindly by a series of pharisaical rules, but through the filling of the Holy Spirit as individuals coming together and being built up as living (i.e. ‘lively’) stones (1 Pet.2:5). To be otherwise risks being barely a suitable place for God to live in. How tragic to build something which perhaps looks the part

and is attractive to man and yet falls short of what God Himself desires!

If it is so, how then are we filled with the Spirit? It can't be generated through emotions, which are transient and sometimes hard to control. We are not told to request filling, but we may infer that we are to desire it and to be concerned to appropriate it in faith and thankfulness. There was a poor old Scottish woman whose son had long emigrated to America and became rich, but was never able to visit. A friend asked, "Doesn't your son ever send money to help you?" "No," the woman sighed, "but he sends me interesting pictures!" She proudly brought them out of a drawer. To her visitor's amazement, they weren't pictures at all, but thousands of dollars' worth of American bank notes. For decades, she'd been needlessly living in poverty, not knowing the value of those 'pictures' and not appropriating them by taking them to the bank, believing that they would be exchanged and used for good. Hopefully the analogy is clear. God has put all His riches at our disposal – Himself, in fact – and as the hymn says, '... flowing through us, Thou canst use us Every day and every hour' (Mary E. Maxwell).

The Results of Filling

What are the results of being filled with the Spirit? We've said that the overall result is always glory to God, but let's be more specific and tangible:

- Deeper understanding and better application of God's Word and will (Eph.5:17; 1 Cor.2:12-13)

- Burdened and answered prayer (Eph.5:20; Acts 4:31)

- Displaying all aspects of the fruit of the Spirit (Eph.5:9; Rom.14:17; Rom.15:13)

- Souls witnessed to by life and lip (Eph.5:15,16; Acts 4:8)
- Vibrant heartfelt worship (Eph.5:19,20; Phil.3:3)
- Love and respect felt and shown for others (Eph.5:21; Col.1:8)
- Sensitivity to sin and falling short and a determination to overcome (Eph.5:18; Rom.8:13)
- Hearing and responding to God's direction every day in the big and the small (Eph.5:10; Acts 13:2).

Even a cursory glance at this list tells us the amazing results that will flow from this filling – results that are certainly precious to God like the beauty of Bezalel and Oholiab's tabernacle! Together, these results will help build a dynamic community of believers today where God can dwell, and then it can truly be said of us: "... you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph.2:22 NIV).

For further study:

1. How can we be sure that our building activity today is directed by the Spirit of God?

CHAPTER THREE: DAVID'S PREPARATION FOR THE TEMPLE (KARL SMITH)

This is a chapter for people who want to give their very best to God. We only have one life and we want to make sure that at the end of it we have done something with it that will last forever, bringing glory to God.

If this describes you, you will be able to relate to King David. He had fought off Israel's enemies and given them peace and security, but he wanted to leave a better legacy even than that. It just didn't seem right that he lived in a comfortable and magnificent palace when God met with His people in a simple tent. He thought that God deserved to live in a beautiful temple that would shine out His grandeur and character for everyone to see. There was nothing wrong with the tent – it was built to God's own design – but David didn't want God to have less than he had himself. Unfortunately so many of us are more like the Jews many years later whom God had to remind about “my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house” (Hag.1:9).

David was not the man chosen to build God's house. He was a man of war and had shed blood (1 Chron. 28:3), while God's house was to be a peaceful place, where even the sparrow finds a home (Ps.84:3). God, however, valued David's desire to build something that would honour Him. The detailed plan was personally given ‘from the hand of the LORD’ (1 Chron.28:19). The king was so fired up with this vision that he devoted the remaining years of his life to preparing for it. He saved up his treasures and the finest things in his kingdom so that his son could

realise the blueprint he had seen. You can imagine father and son spending night after night in the palace planning for what the young man was going to build for God.

The new temple was going to be more complicated than the tabernacle. Indeed, it wasn't just one building, but an interconnected series of courts, rooms, treasuries for the gifts and accommodation for the priests and Levites, all surrounding the Most Holy Place, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept (vv.11-19). Each stone would be lovingly crafted and would fit perfectly into the particular chamber of which it formed a part. Each of these chambers would fit perfectly into the design of the temple as a whole. No wonder the disciples said, when they visited the reconstructed temple that existed on the same site in their own time, "what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1)

God is building a house today that will glorify Him even more than the house David prepared. All believers are 'living stones' (1 Pet.2:4-5), but there is part of God's design that can't be realised by us just as individual stones. Each church of God is, like the one in Corinth, God's building (1 Cor.3:9) and God has quarried the stones to be built in relationship to one another in such buildings. And there is part of the design that can't be realised by these buildings (or churches) acting independently of each other, any more than the design can be realised by believers acting independently of each other without being part of a local church. Ephesians 2:20-21 is most accurately translated in the Revised Version of the Bible as it describes the house God is making out of these buildings: "Christ Jesus ... in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord."

In the New Testament, God has passed on His plan as clearly as He passed it on to David. God wants to see churches of God built into harmonious and loving relationship with one another across

the world to form a place where He can be seen to live. We need to be as careful as Solomon was to consult the Architect's plan if we are not to miss out on its beauty. David had gold and other precious commodities and he wanted to give them to God. You too, I'm sure, want to give Him the very best in your life – your time, your energy, your money, your love. Paul told the Corinthians that the work they were doing in God's temple would be assessed by the Architect when He returns:

“Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor.3:12-13).

David brought gold and silver for overlaying the walls of the house (1 Chron.29:4). Gold reflects Christ's kingly glory, while silver is often thought to have been a reminder to Israel of the price that was paid for their redemption (see Num.18:16). Any service to God that is based on appreciation of these things will be cherished by the Lord when he evaluates our service at the judgement seat. David also gave precious stones to adorn what was already a beautiful house. Even the wood He provided to be overlaid with gold would have been of the very best quality (1 Chron.29:2,8; 1 Kin.6)). Whatever we give, we only give back to God from what He has given to us: “O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own” (1 Chron.29:16).

It delighted David that the people followed his example in giving so generously, willingly and wholeheartedly to the work of God's house. It was a very joyful time. David prayed, “O LORD ... keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts towards you” (v.18). It is our prayer

that the Christian world generally will have such purposes and thoughts to work at God's house in our own time. If you have been challenged by these things, God has shown you what He wants you to do. Now He says to you: "Be strong and courageous and do it. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the LORD God, even my God, is with you. He will not leave you or forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of the LORD is finished" (1 Chron. 28:20).

Bible quotations from ESV.

For further study:

1. In what way is our attitude to God's house (relative to our own house) more like David's attitude or that of Haggai's audience?
2. What do you think of the 'parable' of the perfect fit of stones and buildings as relating to our service today (1 Pet.2:5; Eph.2:20,21)?
3. What 'gold' and 'silver' items (1 Chron.29:4; 1 Cor.3:12,13) are we able to contribute towards the building of God's house?

CHAPTER FOUR: SOLOMON'S TEMPLE – THE MASTERPIECE (DAVID VILES)

“The house to be built for the LORD must be exceedingly magnificent, famous and glorious throughout all countries. I will now make preparation for it” (1). Several places of worship – successively Jewish, Christian and Moslem – have stood on Mount Moriah, in the centre of Jerusalem, over the last three millennia. The first temple – built by Solomon in the mid-10th century BC – was not the largest, but was certainly the most sumptuous. The internal decoration, costly cedar panelling and fir flooring lavishly inlaid with the purest gold, proclaimed the magnificence and glory to which King David refers above. David himself accumulated huge quantities of gold and silver, all to be expended on the decoration of the temple, in addition to the substantial contribution made by Solomon and others (2). Succeeding generations of Israel were justly proud of this exquisite building nestling within the bulwarks of Zion: ‘Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, ... the city of the great King’ (3).

The Vision

“Is not the LORD your God with you? And has He not given you rest on every side?... Therefore arise and build the sanctuary of the LORD God” (4). Builders for God are men and women of vision and faith. Although Solomon was destined to direct the construction, it was his father whose heart was first stirred to contemplate a permanent dwelling place for God. God made no such command directly to David, and it is instructive to trace the growing conviction in the king's heart that God was nevertheless calling him to this great project, until he was able to say with

certainty about a simple threshing floor: “The house of the LORD God is to be here” (5).

Once he had the vision, its realisation became the all-engrossing priority of David’s declining years, prefiguring the One whose zeal for God’s house similarly consumed Him (6). David’s commitment knew no bounds, permitting him little rest until he had done everything possible to procure “a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob” (7).

Making the vision live triumphed even over his own ineligibility, as a ‘man of war’, to direct the actual temple construction. Like every other builder for God in the Scriptures, David was a team player. Other hearts needed to be stirred, in addition to his own, and the elderly king’s well-honed leadership skills were marshalled again, this time to encourage his son and his fellow-workers among the people. “Be strong and courageous, and do the work” (8). We can trace the ministry of encouragement – a vital component in building for God – through successive ventures in both Testaments (9).

The Plan

“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!” (10). Solomon’s words expressed wonder that the cosmic Creator could ever be present in a structure created by man. But so it was to be – the culmination of this great initiative was His descent into the finished Holy of Holies: “the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (11). “My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually” (12).

The temple was designed with reference to the available technology of the time, and archaeological discoveries indicate that it was not unusual in its general plan and external appearance.

However, the interior and the external structures (altar, pillars, basins and the ‘molten sea’) were distinctive and highly symbolic. The entire complex was the result not of human design, but of divine inspiration. King David made his son to understand clearly that the design was given to him in writing by the Spirit and that it was to be followed meticulously in construction (13). Throughout this book, the absolute necessity is emphasised of following the divine pattern in building for God: nothing less is fitting for the presence of the glory of the Lord, and it was no different in Solomon’s case.

The Task

“David said to his son Solomon, ‘... do not fear nor be dismayed, for the LORD God ... will not leave you nor forsake you, until you have finished all the work for the service of the house of the LORD’” (14). The scale of the work to be done was enormous, requiring seven years of concentrated labour to complete the temple complex. It could only be accomplished by harnessing all the energies and resources of the nation and those of the allied kingdom of Lebanon, giving absolute priority, first and foremost, to the house of the Lord. This preceded the construction of Solomon’s own home and the administrative centre of Zion, an order which reflects the fundamental principle that in building for God, the Lord’s things must come first – a priority that had to be re-taught to a later generation (15). Happily, Solomon, like David, was able to enthuse his subjects: the precious materials which were used to build and beautify the temple were the product of sacrificial giving on a national scale, from the King down through the entire community. “The people rejoiced, for they had offered willingly ... with a loyal heart ... to the LORD” (16). Can anything less ever be adequate in building for God?

Getting the job done required measures which were drastic, but normal for the time, thousands of Israelite and foreign residents

being conscripted as labourers (17). Their job was to cut, carry and square the huge amount of stone and timber needed to build the retaining walls and for the temple itself. However, among his many other preparations David had identified a band of trained artisans – “willing craftsmen ... for every kind of service” (18). These skilled men had particular roles in the detailed work, crafting in wood, precious metal or stone to beautify and ornament the temple. This was a high privilege indeed, each working with enthusiasm and operating in partnership with others (Israelite and Lebanese) to build for God as His fellow-workers (19).

The Outcome

“To behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple” (20). “I have loved the habitation of Your house, and the place where Your glory dwells” (21). Every kind of material lavished on the temple – quarried stone, Lebanese cedar and fir, hoarded gold, silver and gems – was of the very highest quality. Even the massive foundation stones of the temple platform were ‘costly’ in terms of the labour expended on their dressing and carving, bringing to mind the later house built upon the devoted work of apostles and prophets (22).

Inside the building, the perfectly squared structural limestone blocks were joined together stone by stone, prefiguring the unity of the living stones of the New Testament house (23). These stones – invisible beneath rich cedar panelling and inlaid gold – provide a lovely picture of the nation’s collective focus not on their own glory, but on that of the God of the house. Every lustrous surface reflected that divine glory and holiness, to the extent that no metal tools were permitted during construction in deference to the sacred nature of the edifice. Here was a place both of glory and of beauty – the best that human skill could create to reflect, inadequately, the beauty of His holiness (24).

Conclusion

“Do not trust in these lying words, saying, ‘... the temple of the LORD are these’” (25). The dedication of the new temple was marked by unprecedented ritual and animal sacrifice. In His response to Solomon’s prayer of dedication, God confirmed both the blessings of obedience and the dire implications of rejecting His will. While God graced it with His presence, He made clear that He was prepared to repudiate even this new and magnificent dwelling if His people’s hearts were no longer committed to the enterprise (26), eventually laying it waste in His fierce anger (27).

Sadly, Israel came to believe that God owed them His presence rather than their conduct meriting it: complacency and indolence quickly replaced enthusiasm and obedience. Israel disregarded the warnings given at the dedication of the temple and the result was national calamity. Today, nothing of that magnificent first temple remains. Instead, Mount Moriah is crowned by another exquisite building with inscriptions in Arabic denying repeatedly the eternal Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ. This sad history is both a continuing warning for all builders for God of the need to hold fast to divine revelation (28) and a challenge to continue to build for Him who, as eternal Son, will one day have every knee bow before Him (29).

Bible quotes from NKJV unless otherwise stated: (1) 1 Chron.22:5 (2) 1 Chron.22:14 refers to quantities equating to about 3,400 tons of gold and 34,000 tons of silver. (3) Ps.48:2 (4) 1 Chron.22:18-19 (5) 1 Chron.22:1 (NIV) (6) John 2:17 (7) Ps.132:5 (8) 1 Chron. 28:20 (NIV) (9) e.g. Hag.1:13-14; Phm.7 (10) 1 Kin.8:27 (11) 1 Kin.8:11 (12) 1 Kin.9:3 (13) 1 Chron.28:11-12,19 (14) 1 Chron.28:20 (15) Hag.1:2-5 (16) 1 Chron.29:9 (17) 1 Kin.5:13; 2 Chron.2:17-18 (18) 1 Chron.28:21 (19) 1 Cor.3:9 (20) Ps.27:4 (21) Ps.26:8 (22) 1

Kin.5:17; cf. Eph.2:20 (23) 1 Pet.2:5 (24) Ps.96:9 (25) Jer.7:4 (26)
1 Kin.9:2-9 (27) Lam.2:6-7 (28) Heb.3:6 (29) Phil.2:10

For further study:

1. David gave out of his own treasure for God's house. What personal contribution are we making?

2. David's vision for God's house was so acute that he was able to overcome a major setback (his ineligibility). In what ways have we encouraged others in building for God despite personal disappointments?

3. Recalling the lesson drawn from the stones hidden beneath the wooden panelling in the Temple, what should be our focus today as living stones within God's house?

CHAPTER FIVE: ZERUBBABEL AND JOSHUA (GREG NEELY)

The magnificence of Solomon's temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in three sieges from 605 to 586 BC. The foundation of costly stones, planks and beams of Lebanese cedars overlaid with gold, quarried mountain stone, artistically framed windows, pillars of bronze, bronze utensils of immeasurable weight, gold and silver filling the treasuries – all of it was desecrated and burned. God's people went into captivity for seventy years – until Cyrus, king of Persia, issued his decree that the temple should be rebuilt in Jerusalem! Forty-nine thousand eight hundred and ninety-seven people responded to the stirring of the Holy Spirit to rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. Laden with gifts and 5,400 recovered stolen articles from Solomon's temple, they set out on the journey home to build.

Useful to the Master

This was not renovation; this was starting from scratch. In 535 BC, exactly 70 years after the first of the Jews were taken captive, the foundation was laid, under the leadership of Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor of Judah, to great praise and thanksgiving to the Lord: "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever" (Ezra 3:11, NASB). Since God has made men and women to be His builders and has supplied them adequately with the tools necessary to do the job, there is nothing as satisfying and exhilarating as being useful to Him right in the middle of His will. True 2,500 years ago; true today as well! There is none who is able to excuse himself from the work of the Lord due to inadequate tools or lack of opportunity. God has provided

us at least one spiritual gift, quite apart from our temperament and natural abilities. And with these God-given abilities and spiritual gifts, He has provided a ministry or service into which we can throw ourselves wholeheartedly so that His building work can be accomplished (1 Cor.12:4-6).

In as much as we engage in such construction, we, too, will be able to sing, praising and giving thanks to the Lord! If there is too little of the one, there will certainly be a dearth of the other. If you see a joyful, inspired Christian, he is likely to be actively engaged in the work to which the Lord has appointed him. If we miss this in our lives, we miss a tremendous amount.

The Good Old Days

Of course, along with tremendous joy from the youthful at heart (whether chronologically young or not) came a dampening effect from some of the old men who had seen the first temple (Ezra 3:12). We could imagine them saying, "It wasn't like this when I was a kid!" "We never did it that way before!" "This temple isn't a patch on the first one!" The lamenting was so loud and continuous that the sound of the shouts of joy could not be distinguished from the sound of weeping (v.13).

We sometimes face similar challenges today in our churches. And the joy, it seems, can sometimes scarcely be heard for the weeping. But looks can be deceiving! For in the courts of heaven, God leans forward in rapt attention and deep appreciation of His people's desire to please Him, their attention to obedience and the spirit of gentleness, forgiveness and holiness that reflects His character. Our churches today may not look quite like the magnificence of what Peter and Paul saw in New Testament churches either. Should we weep? Or should we be thrilled to be a part of the building work of God in the day in which He has placed us? Let's learn from the past, not only so that we do not

repeat its mistakes, but so that we can continue to bring tremendous pleasure to the Lord in our day as we build for Him.

So Much to Do, So Little Time

Fifteen years later, the foundation lay finished, but the superstructure was not even started. Sadly, neither the old men nor the young men were weeping about that! They were too busy! Life had crowded in on them and time was their enemy. They'd faced opposition and hard times and had abandoned the work of the temple so that they could get ahead, as it were, to get the extra car, the big screen TV, the addition on the house, the promotion at work, all of which were good in themselves, but had become the obstacle to building the house of God (Hag.1:2,4,9). Sometimes "good becomes the enemy of better, and better becomes the enemy of best". They weren't engaged in serious sin; they weren't going after other gods; but they also were not going after the work of Almighty God; they were not doing what they had been chosen and equipped to do. We're not so different today, perhaps!

The Secret (discovered in 520 BC)

"Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Consider your ways!'" (Hag.1:5) Literally, the words mean 'set the heart'. Adjust your priorities; arrange your heart; prepare your being for the things that have divine importance. It must be important because God says "consider" five times in Haggai. Even though the people put in overtime on their own priorities, because they neglected the work of the Lord, they received less. God made sure of it. "Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house" (Hag.1:9). The building had ceased, and even though the structure was not going to be as physically magnificent as the temple Solomon constructed, it was going to be of immense spiritual importance to God, as had been the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple. And if important to God, surely it must be

important to His people – then and now! So with God’s word ringing in their ears, they began to build. The work began in just twenty-three days because the people responded to the stirring of the Spirit. That’s the secret: the word of God as directed by the Holy Spirit stirring our hearts, followed by our wholehearted response. Two-and-a-half millennia later it is still the formula for building in God’s house!

But ...

Sometimes that little word ‘but’ carries so much weight. It does so in Haggai 2:3,4: “Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison? But ...” Discouragement because things are not what they used to be is not a new feeling. The Lord recognized that some were discouraged and were perhaps wondering if there was any point in this building project. After all, it would not be the same as the good old days under Solomon. But! But what? “‘But now take courage ... take courage ... and work; for I am with you,’ says the LORD of hosts” (2:4). He is just as magnificent as He was in times past no matter what the structure looks like! He is just as majestic, just as awesome, just as impressive! He is also just as much with us as He was with Solomon or the old men who wept or the younger men who built! “My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!” (v.5). That gives courage. We just need to take hold of it. And with courage goes the responsibility of work! Building work for the God of the house!

The Glory of the House

The glory of the house of God is always Christ. In the future, “The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former” (2:9). Greater even than the gold and costly stones of Solomon’s temple? Infinitely so! For Christ will be the focus. In our day, too, the glory of the house is Christ. Let’s ensure that we are becoming

everything God wants us to be so that we can be doing everything God wants us to do to look like Christ.

For further study:

1. How can we know if what is important to us is the same as what is important to God?

2. How should we expect to be aware of the stirring of the Spirit?

CHAPTER SIX: NEHEMIAH – CUPBEARER TO BUILDER (STEPHEN HICKLING)

As cupbearer to the king of Babylon, Nehemiah enjoyed a position of unparalleled influence in the king's affairs. His authority in the Persian court would have been second only to that of the king. But the scriptural narrative leaves us in no doubt that Nehemiah's accomplishments as a builder for God far outweighed the honour of his secular post in God's estimation.

After more than 140 years of lying in ruin, approximately two miles of wall, together with ten gateways, their doors, bolts and bars, and several towers were reinstated in just 52 days! The figures speak for themselves: Nehemiah's work of re-constructing the ruined wall of the city of Jerusalem was truly remarkable and distinguished him as an outstanding builder for God. Yet Nehemiah differs from some of the other builders we have been considering. So far in this series, we have looked at those men who were directly responsible for the building and rebuilding of the house of God and the objects found within it. Unlike them, Nehemiah didn't have a hand in the construction of God's house itself, but his building work directly supported the preservation of God's dwelling place and was essential to the continuing service of God's covenant people in the place which God had chosen for His name.

The Purpose of the Wall

What, then, was the significance of the wall? Scripture would seem to teach us that the wall, its gates and towers had a dual purpose. The first and most obvious benefit of the wall was that it

would protect the city and the house of God against threat of attack. It enabled God's people to go about the service of God without fear of their enemies, the towers making it possible for watchmen to warn of any hostile presence. In short, the wall shut out Jerusalem's enemies.

In happier days long before the invasion by Babylon, good King Asa recognised that it was God who had given the people rest from their enemies such that they might build and fortify their cities with walls (2 Chron. 14:7). As with any building for God, however, success follows only when God Himself is in the work.

“Unless the LORD builds the house,
they labour in vain who build it;
Unless the LORD guards the city,
the watchman keeps awake in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

It's in recognition of this truth that the building of Zion and its walls was demanded of God and attributed to Him by great builders of the Old Testament (Ps.51:18). There was a second aspect of the wall's purpose. It created a clear physical boundary around certain things which were of great importance to God: His house, the priests serving in it and the people coming up to worship at it. The wall shut in these objects of God's affection and the gates allowed for control to be exercised over access to God's dwelling place and participation in divine service. With the wall in place, there would clearly be an 'inside' and an 'outside' in the divine service of the God of Israel.

What went on inside the wall was to be, first and foremost, for God's enjoyment and pleasure. The word translated 'wall' literally means 'joining' and inside that wall, separated from the other peoples of the earth, the people that God had joined together and

to Himself would be permitted to worship Him as He commanded. To those outside, the wall represented God's protection for Himself of what belonged to Him. Such protection was in order that God might receive for Himself the very best of His people's service for as long as they were obedient to His covenant. If the people's loyalty was divided, such that their separation to God failed, God would cause that wall to be thrown down, just as easily as He had built it (Is.5:5). Nehemiah's singleness of eye, in his devotion to God and his love for the place of God's name, marked him out from the people of his day. The city sprawled without walls, indicative of a people who had no vision of their God, who had cast off the restraint of God's covenant, whose spirits were out of control (Prov.25:28; 29:18).

As far as we can tell, Jerusalem's walls had lain in ruin since Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard of King Nebuchadnezzar, had thrown them to the ground in 586 BC (2 Kin.25:10). This is particularly surprising given that, at the time of Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, the temple had been rebuilt for some 70 years. Finally, in Nehemiah, there came a man who realised the importance of separation in collective service for God. The Jews of Nehemiah's day had no sense of identity as God's own people and no security against attack from their enemies. If the rebuilt house of God was to be preserved and fruitful service there re-established, the wall had to be restored!

Is a Wall Required Today?

Today, God has a spiritual house on the earth, but His demands for the people connected with the service of that house are unchanged. They are to separate themselves to Him, if they are to enjoy the privileges of His house (2 Cor.6:17). The need for God's holy nation to maintain the 'wall', the visible expression of their separation to Him, is only heightened by the large distances that divide this people physically.

Nehemiah's words to the Arab, the Horonite and the Ammonite, who mocked the builders, were clear: 'The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right, or memorial in Jerusalem' (Neh.2:20). The enemies of God were in the midst of His people and they had no right to be there! The things connected with God's house are to be touched only by that holy nation for whom God has prepared them.

The Mark of an Outstanding Builder

Nehemiah was an exceptional builder for God, whose efforts undoubtedly secured the safe access of God's people to His house for years to come. What can we learn from this outstanding builder?

Direction of heart. First and foremost Nehemiah loved his God and that produced in him a desire for God's dwelling place (Neh.1:2). Though he had probably never seen it before, Nehemiah's heart was towards the city of God. That direction of heart meant that he was willing to leave a position of wealth, power, and influence to share the reproach of his people.

Desire of God. The desire to build did not come from Nehemiah, but from God (Neh.2:12) and Nehemiah waited patiently for God's timing in the matter. Even on arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah ensured that human ideas and opinions would have no place in planning to build for God; his survey of the wall was carried out in secret! Nehemiah had come to carry out what God had shown him to do and he assured others of God's part in it (Neh.6:16).

Planning with prayer. The records of Nehemiah's prayers account for over a tenth of the book named after him and reveal a man who was serious about prayer. For about four months he knelt

before God in persistent prayer before approaching the king with his request for leave to go to Jerusalem. Even as he was before the king, he spoke to God (Neh.2:4).

Believing the impossible. God's people were small, but Nehemiah knew that the God, who had once blessed that people above all the peoples of the earth, was still great! He asked great things of God and attempted great things in reliance on Him (Neh.2:20). Having counted the cost, he knew that His God had sufficient resource to finish the work (Lk.14:28).

Not deterred by opposition. An earlier attempt to rebuild the walls in about 458 BC had failed due to opposition (Ezra 4:12,23). Nehemiah certainly had his enemies, but he would not engage them in argument and was not discouraged by them. Nehemiah's response was always to re-focus the people on their God (Neh.4:14), considering the opponents to be enemies, not of him, but of God.

Correcting wrongs between brethren. The issues that threatened to derail the building came from within as well as from without. Nehemiah did not compromise himself, but dealt justly, setting an example by his own unselfish provision for the people of God (Neh.5:10,14).

Prepared to lead by example. Finally, Nehemiah was not aloof, but identified himself with the other builders; having surveyed the job for them, he courageously engaged in the work even when his personal safety was under threat.

Bible quotations from NASB unless otherwise stated.

For further study:

1. What evidence is there to suggest that the New Testament churches of God had a clearly defined boundary?

2. Nehemiah used his exceptional 'building' skills to lead the people in a way that enabled them to worship God as He required. What examples do you see in the New Testament of ways in which we can lead others to a point where God is able to receive the worship that is due to Him?

CHAPTER SEVEN: PETER (DAVID WOODS)

Filled with the power of God through the indwelling Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached about God's wonderful developing purposes for mankind. A new era was being introduced by God: the new covenant that Christ had mentioned in the upper room the night before Calvary (Lk.22:20). Peter was now a key man to kick-start the movement, to take things forward and explain all that God intended people to know. Using the Old Testament Scriptures to great effect, Peter declared that something new was happening and that it was according to God's will already stated through His prophets hundreds of years before!

Simon or Peter?

Simon had first met the Lord Jesus over three years earlier, and some of the first words he heard from the Son of God were, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter)' (Jn.1:42). The Lord looked at this fisherman knowing that he, one day, would be a builder of the house of God. Simon would change, in time, to become that 'rock' of strength that the Lord would require as the new spiritual house of God on earth would take shape.

It's interesting to note that one of the rare times when we read of the Lord calling Simon 'Peter' is when Simon declared: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (see Matt.16:13-18). The people who interacted with Jesus weren't sure who He really was. But Simon had the faith to believe that the man he had given up his nets and his boat to follow was the Messiah. His personal experience of the Lord had confirmed this to him. "You are Peter,

and on this rock I will build my church,” was Jesus’ response to Simon’s statement. The name that He had indicated Simon would come to be known by returns, as if the Lord was indicating that Simon was maturing in God’s things. The ‘Church’ that the Lord referred to was the church, which is his body (Eph.1:22-23), which would start to be built on the Day of Pentecost and would comprise all believers in Him, built upon the foundation of faith that Peter had just confirmed.

This is a great truth for all Christians to lay hold of: we are brought in, at the time of faith in Christ, to a Church of which the Lord could declare ‘the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’. Again and again, the Scriptures teach us that no one can be lost from the Church the Body of Christ; it is eternal. Our salvation is forever secure. Praise God! The Lord had yet more for Simon to understand and deeper things for him to lay hold of by faith. Simon would eventually develop a greater appreciation of God’s purposes for a worshipping people on earth. Accordingly, on occasions, despite giving him a new name, Jesus reverts to calling him Simon (e.g. in John 21)!

Peter Fulfilled!

Before He went to Calvary, Christ promised that the Holy Spirit, ‘the Spirit of Truth’, would come and teach the disciples all things, helping them to remember what He had taught them and leading them into all the truth (see Jn.14:26;16:13). On the Day of Pentecost this promise was fulfilled, and with the sound of a rushing wind and in the visible form of tongues of fire on the heads of the group of 120, God the Spirit came to indwell those first Christians. 1 Corinthians 6:19 affirms this great truth: “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.” God continues to live with mankind on earth, indwelling believers spiritually, confirming that they are children of God (Rom.8:16) and seeking to lead them into the truth.

Peter shows his character on the Day of Pentecost. Would it be going too far to suggest that Simon is finally becoming Peter at last? In Acts, whenever Simon's name is used, it is always qualified by, 'who is also called Peter'. His preaching leads about 3,000 people to saving faith in Christ; they were also taught the new way of God which prompted them to be baptised and added to the group of 120, forming the first Church of God in Jerusalem (see Acts 2:41-42). This group was distinctive: they had placed their faith in Christ as Saviour, they had obeyed the Lord's command to be baptised and they had been added to join with others who followed the same teaching. It's important to note that it was the Lord who added them (Acts 2:47). This was of God.

Peter Explains God's New House

Peter, and the other apostles, now had a real understanding of what the Lord had taught during the 40 days He had spent with them after His resurrection (Acts 1:3). He had spoken to them about the Kingdom of God, about God's desire for a precious people on earth who would submit to His authority, who would worship and serve Him. For these Jewish men it was a lot to take in; Israel had been designated God's people at Sinai, but because of their disobedience, God had now taken the Kingdom from them, fulfilling the words of the Lord recorded in Matthew 21:43. God's precious worshipping people would now be believing disciples joined together in Churches of God. This was God's Kingdom now.

Peter's first letter, written about 35 years after that Pentecost day, was an encouragement to the early Churches of God. He exhorted the saints to be strong, to be careful with the Truth and to be wary of those false teachers who were trying to destroy what was so special to God. 1 Peter 2:4-10 is a highlight in the Scriptures. Let's visit a portion of this important passage together: "As you come to him, a living stone ... you yourselves like living

stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet.2:4-5).

Each individual believer is described as a living stone – a person saved by faith in Christ, who has passed from death to life. The Lord Jesus is also described as a living stone, but the later verses quoted from Isaiah 28 indicate that He is also the cornerstone, chosen and precious (1 Peter 2:6) and the head of the corner (v.7 margin). He’s the stone in the new house of God to which all other living stones are aligned. We have a clear sense here of the need to be ‘in line’ with Christ, which would indicate the requirement of each individual to obey His commands, to own Him as Lord and accept His teaching as it’s revealed to us in God’s Word.

‘Built up’ confirms that individuals are laid together, as stones would be in a building, to form a structure which is known as the spiritual house for God. This house is to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God, giving God pleasure in their spiritual service of worship, accepted through Christ the Great Priest over the house of God (see Heb.10:19-21).

Israel’s history had been dominated by the physical house of God and the Aaronic priesthood. Peter’s burden was for his fellow Jews to appreciate that the restrictions of the physical Old Covenant had been superseded by the freedom of the spiritual New Covenant. But Peter would soon be taught that God’s New Covenant privileges were not the preserve of His Old Covenant people. Peter was led by God to the Gentiles who, after hearing the good news, received salvation and were indwelt by the Holy Spirit to prove it! Soon Churches of God were growing and developing in countries all around the Middle East and Asia as other apostles travelled with the message fulfilling the Lord’s command of Matthew 28:18-20.

Are You a Builder for God?

If we can view Peter's maturing process in these terms, might it be fair to ask: are you a Simon or a Peter? Peter became a great builder for God. He was God's key man at a time when people needed to understand the new spiritual movement. It took him time to become what God would have him be. Maybe God is working the same way with you? As we have watched Simon maturing I pray that we will all be like him, maturing in the things of God and fully appreciating the wonder of God's spiritual house. It's not enough to appreciate it; we must be part of it! It's what God desires for every believer.

(Bible quotations from ESV).

For further study:

1. What two distinct revelations did Peter receive (Matt.16:18; Acts 1:3; 1 Pet.2:4-10)?
2. What are some of the similarities and some of the differences between the Church the Body and the house of God?
3. Outline what is 'the pillar and ground of the truth' (1 Tim.3:15).

CHAPTER EIGHT: JAMES, BROTHER OF THE LORD JESUS (DAVE WEBSTER)

It must have been hard growing up with an older brother who never did, or said, anything wrong! Maybe that was what turned James – and his other brothers and sisters – against Jesus so that we read “... even his own brothers did not believe in him” (Jn.7:5). Those of us brought up in a Christian home can sometimes fail to see the blessings of that environment, but can easily list the difficulties and it can be the same if we have been introduced to the house of God at an early age. James messed up his time in a God-honouring home but, later, made sure that he and others understood the significance of living in the Kingdom of God and it was in that way that he became a great builder for God.

Maybe James gives us a clue to the great turn-around in his life when he writes, “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ ...” (Jas.2:1). Glorious because of the resurrection, for not only had James, obviously, heard about it, but the risen Jesus made a special appearance to James as he did to Peter and, later, to Paul, too (1 Cor.15:7). It seems that the Lord Jesus only appeared to those who believed – so the reality of who Jesus really was must have already been dawning on James for the Lord to make that special visit to see him.

Unlike Bezalel and Oholiab who physically constructed sacred objects for the tabernacle, or David who amassed a fortune to pay for the temple, or Solomon who arranged the building of his great temple, or Zerubbabel who started again in 535 BC, James is not linked with any physical building. You can't go to the site of James'

temple and there's no heritage plaque commemorating his architectural skills! So, in what way was James a builder for God?

Building by Leading

James has traditionally been recognised as a leader of the Jerusalem church. When Peter was released from prison by an angel of the Lord and interrupted the prayer meeting with the answer to their prayers in person, he "... motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place' (Acts 12:17). After his amazing conversion Paul went to Jerusalem to speak to Peter and James (Gal.1:18-19), and it was in this leadership role that James' God-given skills were to be harnessed in God's building project: redeemed people gathered together in churches of God forming the house of God following the pattern as Moses did, using the gifts God gave them as Bezalel and Oholiab did, giving to God as David did and seeking to build to God's glory as Solomon and Zerubbabel did.

The blueprint for this spiritual building project had been given by the Lord Jesus to His disciples in the days following His resurrection and they, in turn, preached it and passed it on to others (Acts 1:3). It went from Jerusalem to Judea and then on to Samaria. That posed the first difficulty – was the gospel open to people who were not Jewish? The Lord's clear answer was, "Yes," of course. That meant bringing in people who had never been familiar with the Scriptures and the Jewish law. What about circumcision? The food laws? Should they learn to keep the Sabbath? There was a split in the making because 'some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1).

Paul and Barnabas were the workers on the ground and they did not agree with them. Some might have been happy for there to emerge a Jewish church and a Gentile church with key differences in teaching and practice. But the house of God is meant to be ‘the pillar and foundation of the truth’ not an umbrella organisation for diverse attitudes! (1 Tim.3:15). Elders are to rule as a united body and, as James’ brother Jude puts it, disciples are ‘to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints’ (Jude 1:3). James was able to draw on Peter’s experiences and his own knowledge of the Scriptures and the Spirit of God used him to move God’s project forward and prevent a major split.

Building by Standing

Paul writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit referred to James as one of the ‘pillars’ of the early churches of God (Gal.2:9). A pillar is an upright supporting post. It is a great privilege and responsibility to be one of those in God’s house which is, itself, ‘the pillar and foundation of the truth’. James taught that patience in the face of suffering and perseverance in the face of life’s trials are ways we can stand pillar-like: ‘You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near’ (Jas.5:8). The return of the Lord Jesus and the promise of the crown of life are incentives enough to keep on keeping on! (Jas.1:12; 5:7-9).

James believed in unity in diversity; not as some would proclaim today in which truth and error come together but in a very real practical way. James, Peter and John agreed that Paul and Barnabas should work with the Gentiles while they should focus on the Jews (Gal.2:9). Paul’s recollection of the Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15 is not of schism or compromise but of standing firm for the faith. James in summing up recognised that God had “at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself,” and then he quoted Amos in support (Acts 15:14). Even though he himself felt called to minister to fellow

Jews he recognised the place for the Gentile believers as fellow disciples and that they should not make it difficult for them to be part of God's spiritual house.

Building by Teaching

James recognised the value of teaching! Let's beware of the current notion that everyone is entitled to his opinion! In God's kingdom we are built up as we learn, and we learn when we present ourselves for teaching. The important issues for James were intensely practical ones – the nature of temptation and its source. 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds', would make them think hard (Jas.1:2)! He pointed them to the Word of God not to his own ideas: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (Jas.1:22). He warned about the dangers of the tongue, false wisdom and evil desires. He was concerned about brothers and sisters falling out, the future and how to face it and the dangers of wealth. He has teaching on patience, prayer and confession. He felt so strongly about these things that he wrote his letter, which became part of the inspired Scriptures.

These first century issues are, of course, also twenty-first century issues. We need to know what to do in the face of 'trials of many kinds' or our lives of service may be derailed. We need to know what God expects from us; James was promoting an anti-discrimination policy centuries before it became part of our normal expectations. We can identify with the strong warnings about what we say. Only God knows how many lives have been ruined by slander, gossip or careless talk. Let's not do it!

We need to know the difference between what our society (James, like John, calls it 'the world') regards as wise and what God's wisdom is like. Am I a peacemaker or a trouble maker? We certainly need to hear warnings about the danger of amassing

wealth and living in luxury and self-indulgence while ignoring the injustice all around us. And we need to remember that ‘the Lord’s coming is near’ (Jas.5:8) – keeping that in mind will focus our minds on what we are building and sharpen ideas as to life’s priorities. James’ final word in building for God is what to do about those who have fallen down. Do we want them back? Do we just leave them to go their own way? ‘My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins’ (Jas.5:19-20).

(Bible quotations are from the NIV).

For further study:

1. In what way do the events of Acts 15, under James’ Spirit-led leadership, fill out the pattern of God’s New Testament house?
2. Which of the practical issues featured in the letter by James are of major importance in church life today?

CHAPTER NINE: PAUL, THE WISE MASTER BUILDER (BRIAN JOHNSTON)

This world has seen some famous building projects: the Great pyramid at Giza and the Great Wall of China to name but two. Each one is wonderfully impressive in its own way; each a testimony to human ingenuity and enterprise; each overcoming many setbacks and challenges in the making. But two thousand years ago, a building project which is documented in the Acts of the Apostles eclipsed them all, and left behind churches of God to grace the New Testament landscape.

At what cost were they produced? From the dynamic travel-diary doctor Luke has given us of Paul the master builder in the book of Acts, we read of dangers inherent in travel as well as from evil men; struggles in communication with local languages, awkward misinterpretations by those of differing worldviews; the heartbreak of exposing deceitful workers; the crushing weight of responsibility and spiritual grief; and all this blending into the many anxieties inherent in cross-cultural church-planting. Beyond all this, the full cost of these structures could never be computed. The raw material of 'living stones' (1 Pet.2:5) was quarried at Calvary. In different locations shortly afterward, and again today, this would lead to churches of God 'which he bought with the blood of his own' (Acts 20:28 lit.).

We are aware of gangsters coming to Christ, and of academics who would later regard themselves as reluctant converts, but the case of Saul of Tarsus (Paul) is remarkable by any standard. A Jew of impeccable pedigree, and a Roman citizen to boot, from 'no mean city', having received a first-class education, Saul of Tarsus

seemed to be a man going somewhere. In fact, it was while he was en route to Damascus, to vent his fury at Christians there, that Saul encountered the risen Christ. To stare at the sun with the naked eye easily results in blindness, but that day it was a light above the brightness of the noon-day sun which Saul saw (Acts 9). After that he was blind to anything this world could offer him.

From the timing given in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, Bible scholar, F.F. Bruce (1) suggests Paul's experience of being 'caught up into the third heaven' may well date to the time between him returning to Tarsus and later being called upon by Barnabas to exercise his teaching gift at Syrian Antioch. From this experience in the extra-terrestrial realm Paul learned how to lean on God's grace amid human weakness. This would prove essential for the Antioch-based missions soon to follow in successive stages: first to Central Asia Minor, then to the Aegean perimeter, then further afield to Illyricum (Albania) and Rome.

To the Church of God in Philippi, the first on European soil, Paul wrote of the 'progress' of the Gospel using a word describing the action of wood-cutters who cleared the way for advancing armies. Paul was a trailblazer: his aim was to head for 'regions beyond' (2 Cor.10:16), labouring where no-one had previously worked. Paul moved along Roman highways (like the Via Egnatia) as they were the main lines of communication, preaching and planting in strategic centres. He then left to others the task of further dissemination: Thessalonica serving as a base for further evangelization in Macedonia; Corinth for Achaia; and Ephesus for proconsular Asia.

Paul could both graphically portray a crucified Messiah and also be comfortable reasoning from evidence in a workshop style, interacting with his audience as he 'told thoroughly' (Acts 17:2). This would seem to indicate that Paul was careful to define his terms, point to supporting evidence, and debate with his critics – a

method of this master builder for God applicable today in societies where Christianity is again fast becoming marginalized.

When the news of outstanding success on the first mission spread, there was joy at Antioch, but perhaps a measure of consternation at Jerusalem. It appears that just as Peter visited Antioch (Gal.2:11), ‘troublemakers’ came from Jerusalem to unsettle the new churches in Galatia. By the time of Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Conference, with the wisdom of a master builder, Paul had built his winning case for the crucial debate there. The gospel of salvation by God’s grace through faith alone was preserved.

Preachers ever since have admired the wisdom of Paul’s Gospel presentation at Athens. Fundamentally biblical in its approach (the essence of Romans 1-4 may be seen in Acts 17:22-31), this address illustrates well the versatility of the wise master builder in being ‘all things to all men’ as he engaged with these cultured pagans. For this was no theologically heavy treatise on being found ‘in Christ’ by grace, but with the persuasiveness of one who had already by this time been a successful evangelist to the pagan world (1 Thess.1:9ff.) he showed his familiarity with their culture by quoting their poets as points of contact with his audience.

Paul began with creation and ended with judgement: it was a case of ‘In the beginning, God’ and ‘In the end, God’. When Paul declared afterwards to the Church of God at Corinth that he had “determined to know nothing among [them] except ... Christ ... crucified” (1 Cor.2:2), he was not acknowledging a mistaken approach at Athens, but as a master builder he had discerned exactly what was required for the situation now facing him at Corinth. True, fewer responded at Athens, but that was because of their prior commitment to a worldly philosophy (compare the slow rate of progress today in the western world with its dominant secularism and naturalism).

Once at Corinth, Paul described the church there as being 'God's building' (1 Cor.3:9). It was here that Paul developed his pastoral maturity, through having to endure power struggles. He says, 'like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it' (1 Cor.3:10). He then seems to hint that not all who built on this foundation were building well. At the beginning of Second Corinthians, Paul seems deflated. It appears this comes after a painful visit there during which his authority was challenged by some, and Paul, unable to rest, follows this up by sending them a stern (non-biblical) letter which Titus delivered. Paul had been anxious to know how they received it and is overjoyed to be told by Titus that the church has responded positively (2 Cor.7:6-8). However, later it appears as if the dissatisfaction of some there (with Paul) was again whipped up, possibly by others arriving from Jerusalem. Masterfully, Paul by the Spirit answers the questions put to him by the church, and by turns is forthright and compassionate, but always passionately committed to them.

Although many of the details are not recorded, Paul's time at Ephesus was probably the most difficult of his missionary career. It seems likely this is the Asian 'affliction' of which he writes in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 when testifying to God's deliverance of him and his companions 'from so great a peril of death'. We feel for Paul grappling by correspondence with major issues at Corinth while contending with 'many adversaries' at Ephesus (1 Cor.16:9). But there was also 'a wide door for effective service' as Paul again showed his versatility by engaging with synagogue audiences which included God-fearing non-Jews, so providing a bridgehead to the Gentiles. Then, when indicated, Paul drew the serious contacts away into lecture-halls or house groups (see Acts 18:7).

Regarding the former, of which we read in Acts 19, someone has guessed that in Ephesus there would probably be more people

awake at 1 a.m. than at 1 p.m., but the lecture hall was likely only available to Paul during siesta time. However, it seems few slept through Paul's lectures on exploring Christianity, as 'the whole of Asia heard the Word of the Lord' (v.10). Paul, as we have seen, in writing to 'the church of God which is at Corinth' (1 Cor.1:2 NKJV), said to them, '... you are God's building' (1 Cor.3:9 NKJV), '... you are [a] temple of God' (1 Cor.3:16). When writing to the Church of God at Ephesus, he developed his building metaphor further, describing how "each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph.2:21 ASV).

Ordinary Greek idiom here calls for 'every building', not for 'all the building' (Robertson, Grammar (2)), though, in Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament (3), he adds: 'it is not perfectly clear what that means'. Was Robertson thinking only in terms of the Church the Body? If, however, we take our cue from the Corinthian text (3:9), can we not see that Paul had in mind the visible unity of local churches of God combining in the aggregate to form God's spiritual house on earth, being 'the pillar and support of the truth' (1 Tim.3:15)?

Paul's preaching was of 'the whole purpose of God' (Acts 20:27), resulting in companies of disciples, all baptized by immersion in water, all added locally to church of God fellowship, all within an overall community of interdependent churches serving everywhere according to the one original pattern of teaching (1 Cor.4:17), and maintained under a fellowship of elders while separated to God (Acts 14:23; 15). The whole purpose of God was to provide in this way for a people on earth (Heb.3:6) who would access the sanctuary in heaven (Heb.6:19) in their weekly worship at the breaking of the bread (Heb.10:19). In this, we arrive at the very apex of our year's study which has featured

various builders who built for God, but always according to God's own pattern, as Paul also did (2 Tim.1:13).

Paul might have been forgiven if he felt low in spirits while facing up to the chill prospect of his final winter on earth (2 Tim.4:21). The spiritual career which had begun with a blinding light on the Damascus highway was coming to an end in a dark dungeon in Rome. He had foreseen the coming of 'savage wolves' (Acts 20:29) and saw much of his work washed away like sand-castles when the tide turned against him in Asia (2 Tim.1:15). Would history ever see their like again? By the grace of God, yes! For Paul, like the missionary returning home by ship and seeing others being granted a grand welcome ceremony while there was no-one at the harbour to greet him, Paul might have felt sad, but then as with that missionary of more modern times, he too would have heard an inner voice assuring him, "You are not home yet!" Many will swell the ranks of the Thessalonians as forming his 'joy' and 'crown' (1 Thess.2:19) on that one future day for which the wise master builder lived his life: the day of Christ (Phil.1:6).

References:

(1) F.F. Bruce, Paul, Apostle of the Free Spirit, Paternoster Press; Revised edition (February 1981)

(2) A.T. Robertson, Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research, Broadman & Holman (June 1947) p.772

(3) A.T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, B&H Publishing Group (Oct 1980)

Biblical quotations from NASB unless otherwise stated.

For further study:

1. Which of Paul's gospel presentation ideas and church-planting strategies are particularly suited to a) the west and b) the east today?
2. Identify a key purpose of God's house on earth.
3. How do the spiritual metaphors of stones, buildings and temple combine to give the complete biblical picture of God's spiritual house in this present age?

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