

The new temple

Text: Ezekiel 40-43:12

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Scriptures: 1 Cor 6:12-20; Ezekiel 40-43:12

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 84, 204, 393, 149b, 529

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #13)

Theme: Ezekiel receives visions from the Lord depicting in detail a new temple which the glory of the Lord then fills and he then calls the people to repentance and obedience.

Proposition: Jesus Christ is the new temple, repent, know him well and obey him.

Introduction

The whole Bible is God's Word. It is all 'breathed out by God' (2 Tim 3:16). However, there are some parts of the Bible which I wouldn't recommend as the first place to start reading Scripture. Our text today from Ezekiel chapters 40-43 would be one of them!

It's full of detailed measurements of a virtual temple which the Prophet is shown in a vision. We read of thresholds, gates, vestibules, courts, walls, windows, steps, rooms, side chambers, galleries, and entrances, all carefully assigned measurements in cubits. Having read these words we might well be left with questions like:

- Why is all this detail about a visionary building in the Bible?
- Why does this seem like such an anti-climax after the vivid image of the valley of dry bones coming to life in chapter 37, or the great defeat of Gog and his army in chapters 38-39?
- What significance, if any, does this vision have for us today?
- Where is the gospel in this part of the Bible?

To rightly answer these questions, we're going to need to look carefully at what the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, has caused to be written down for our instruction.

Let's do this now under three headings:

- The Lord promises a perfectly rebuilt temple
- The Lord's glory fills the new temple
- The Lord calls his people to know the temple

1. The Lord promises a perfectly rebuilt temple

When I was younger and living in Europe, I had opportunity, as a tourist, to visit many large and impressive buildings there: including castles, stately homes and cathedrals. Sometimes I was able to take photographs inside these large structures and occasionally I would be shown round by a tour guide who would point out many features that I would otherwise likely have missed. Some of you here today have had similar experiences overseas.

In our text, Ezekiel is visiting a large building. He is like a tourist. The prophet is not physically exploring a structure, all of what we read in our text takes place in 'visions of God' (40:2). His 'tour guide' is an angelic being whom he meets and who then proceeds to show him around this new temple. Ezekiel doesn't have a camera to record what he sees, instead, the man who leads him through the different parts of the building has a linen cord and a measuring reed in his hand (40:3). In those days a linen cord marked off in multiples of a measuring reed enabled longer distances to be gauged. It is a temple very much like the one built by King Solomon, which had then been destroyed by the Babylonians, 14 years before this vision.

As the tour begins in 40:5, Ezekiel sees a wall surrounding the whole temple area. This barrier is as high and as thick as the tour guide's reed. This measuring reed is 'six long cubits' in length - that makes the reed a little over 3m long. The perimeter wall is then over 3m thick and 3m high. The idea is that it is an effective barrier to prevent those who are outside from coming in. The only way into this building is therefore through the gates. The three entranceways (on the East, South and North) are heavily fortified. These gates are over 13m wide and 15m deep! (40:13,15). This is a holy temple, whereas that which is outside is not holy. The wall and gates therefore '*make a separation between the holy and the common*' (42:20).

As the tour continues, the guide leads the way, measuring as he goes. Ezekiel is guided from the East gate to the outer court, then to the North gate, the South gate and into the inner court where there are chambers for the priests. This building is similar to the one built by Solomon, however regulations have become more strict in this new temple. Whereas the Levites as a whole served in the temple, now only the sons of Zadok do so (40:46).

The inner court is separated from the outer courtyard and is defended by large, thick gates like those in the outer wall. The inner court is elevated above the outer court. The Most Holy Place is at the centre (41:4) being the only square space in the building. It is reached by passing through three openings of increasing narrowness (approx. 7.5m, 5m, 3m) Ezekiel is not permitted to enter the Most Holy Place. The angelic guide goes in alone to measure the space (41:3-4).

There are no fewer than 90 rooms in the temple on three levels (41:5-11). The only item of furniture in the temple is an altar of wood in the outer sanctuary (41:22). At the end of the tour, Ezekiel is brought back out to where he started, and the length of the outside wall is measured. The obvious question which this intricate vision raises is: what does this all mean? Various answers have been given, including:

- This is an expression of Ezekiel's personal interest in the temple. He was from a priestly family, but was stuck in exile in Babylon and his enthusiasm for this new temple is expressed in all the details we read. He wrote down all these details very much like someone might write or talk about their favourite hobby. This explanation is not satisfactory. The Holy Scriptures do not contain the ramblings of people who are merely writing about their personal interests and hobbies. Our text is an inspired revelation from God with a timeless message for all who will hear His word and seek to understand what he is saying to them.

- This is a blueprint for a new temple which will be built in Jerusalem during the 1000-year period after which believers have been ‘raptured’. This is the ‘dispensational’ interpretation. This explanation is also not satisfactory. A future temple in which sacrifices would be made makes no sense in light of the fulfilment of the sacrificial system through the shedding of Christ’s blood on behalf of others (Heb 10:4).

Whilst there are many accurate dimensions in our text, the heights and construction materials are not specified. It’s interesting to note that there is no direction from the Lord in our text to build this new temple, as there was for Solomon when God spoke to his father David saying: “*He shall build a house for my name*” (1 Chron 22:10a). This is not a physical temple which will be built with human hands.

The next section of Ezekiel’s temple tour helps us to understand what these visions meant for him, for the exiles in Babylon and for us. This brings us to our second point.

2. The Lord’s glory fills the new temple

If you’re looking for a good financial investment you might consider buying property in the United Kingdom. With all the uncertainty surrounding Brexit, there might well be some bargains to be had! You might want to consider buying an unoccupied church building. Approximately 20 churches are closed each year by the Church of England and then sold off through real estate agents. An empty church is no use as a church.

We know that the church is not a building, but a group of people, a congregation. A true church is more than just a gathering of people who call themselves Christians, it is a congregation who come together in the presence of God and worship Him. The temple which Ezekiel has just toured in a vision as recorded in chapters 40-42 is an empty space, apart from the altar.

Then, in chapter 43, the Prophet sees the ‘*glory of the God of Israel coming from the east*’ (43:2). This was like the vision which Ezekiel had right at the start of this book when he was by the Chebar canal (Eze 1.3). God’s glory returns to the temple through the east gate, from where it had earlier left (10:18-19). In contrast to the gradual depart of God’s presence prior to the destruction of the old temple, now His glory returns rapidly. Not only does the glory of the Lord fill the temple as it once occupied Solomon’s temple when that building was consecrated (1 Kings 8:10-11), now it ‘spills out’ causing the earth to shine (43:2). It is clear that this new temple is more glorious than the former one.

The Lord’s voice comes forth from the temple and Ezekiel hears these words “*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 people of Israel forever*” (Eze 43:7a). Whereas God’s presence had left the temple in Jerusalem because of the repeated disobedience of His people, His presence would never depart from this new temple. Now, in light of this promise from God, we can go back to the pressing question: what does all this mean?

Even the strongest of buildings will not last forever on this earth. If ongoing wear and tear, earthquakes, terrorist or military attacks do not destroy them, they will certainly not stand when this earth is burned up at the end of this age (2 Peter 3:10). The vision of this new

temple is revealed in terms which Ezekiel and his fellow exiles could understand. However it does not point to a physical building, but to a temple filled with God's glory which would stand forever.

Over 500 years after Ezekiel was taken on a virtual tour of this new temple, gospel writer John would record what he and others had looked upon, not in a vision, but in real life. He testifies "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). When John recorded the first miracle which Jesus performed on this earth at a wedding in Cana, when he supernaturally turned water into wine, he says that Jesus '*manifested his glory*'. Later, at the Mount of Transfiguration, three disciples saw the radiant glory of Christ shining brightly (Matt 17:2). Jesus is "*the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature*" (Heb 1:3).

On the first Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east (the Mount of Olives) and went into the temple there. When He predicted His own death and resurrection, Jesus said: "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" (John 2:19) John explains "*He was speaking about the temple of his body*" (John 2:21). One of the names of Jesus expresses the glorious presence of God being with His people: Immanuel (Matt 1:23) meaning '*God with us*'.

All of these Scriptures help us to correctly interpret the visionary temple shown to Ezekiel. Jesus is the New Temple. In Him the presence of God dwells. He is the person to whom the visions given to Ezekiel point. He is the One who dwells in the midst of God's people now because they are His body, the church (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; Rev 21:22). He is the One who will be with God's people forever in the New Heavens and New Earth. John clearly saw this in a vision of the future yet to come when he recorded in Revelation 21:22: "*And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*".

The promise that God would never leave His people would have been a great encouragement to the exiles after 25 years of captivity in Babylon. This promise is a great encouragement to us today and is expressed in many different ways in Scripture. Here in our text as part of an intricate vision recording detailed temple architecture, also in the words of Jesus before He ascended into heaven: "*Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matt 28:20). Our text today is a powerful message of hope for the future of all the Lord's people, but it is also a call to know the new temple in detail. Which brings us to our 3rd point.

3. The Lord calls His people to know the temple

When I've been a tourist being shown around castles, stately homes and cathedrals there's no purpose other than understanding a little more history, appreciating fine artwork and architecture and having some photos to remind me of the trip.

For Ezekiel, his virtual tour of the New Temple had far greater and more lasting significance than this. He was called by the Lord to: "*Describe to the house of Israel the temple*" (43:10). "*Make known to them the design of the temple, its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, that is, its whole design; and make known to them as well all its statutes and its whole design and all its laws, and write it down in their sight*" (43:11).

This vision was for Ezekiel AND for those he lived with in exile. He was to convey to them in precise detail what he had seen. This was a message of great hope *but also* a call to holiness. The reason for conveying the details of the new temple was so that: *“that they may be ashamed of their iniquities”* (43:10), *“so that they may observe all its laws and all its statutes and carry them out”* (43:11).

The purpose of communicating the details of this elaborate temple vision is that through this knowledge the people would be led to repentance and to an ability to obey the law of God. When the glory of God in His perfect holiness is revealed there is only one response of those who see Him for who He is and know themselves for who they are: worship. In our text, when Ezekiel, saw the glory of God filling the new temple he fell of his face (43:5). When Isaiah saw a vision of God’s glory, he proclaimed a covenant curse on himself: *“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”* (Isaiah 6:5).

Is this not precisely what results from knowing the Lord Jesus? When people like you and I look upon the glory of God in the person of His Son, revealed through the Bible, or conveyed to us by disciples of Christ, there are two possible reactions:

- Like the unbelieving Jews a person ‘plots’ to remove Jesus from their life, rather than being ashamed of their rebellion against God.
- Or we turn towards Jesus, falling as it were on our faces; like Ezekiel when He saw the glory of the Lord filling the temple (43:5). Ashamed of our sins, hungry to know the law of God so that we might willingly obey that law. Turning to worship the Lord in the beauty of His holiness.

You, like most readers of the Bible today, likely find the details of this vision of a new temple a bit perplexing, perhaps something of an anti-climax after what has gone before in the book of Ezekiel. You might think all those measurements of gates, vestibules and courts have no real meaning for you. However, when you understand that they point forward to the absolute perfection of Jesus Christ, the New Temple, through whom the presence of God dwells with His people forever, then you can see that these words are for you, as much as they were for the exiles in Babylon 2,500 years ago.

What is your response to knowing the details of the New Temple? How do you live in the light of the ‘architecture’ of the Lord Jesus Christ? Remember the high, thick walls of the new temple in the vision. Remember the defensive gates which guarded the entranceways. Only those who are holy have a place within the temple. It is not accessible to everyone. Remember that the standard of purity for the priesthood in this new temple is stricter than the old. The temple is not a place for the common man, woman or child. Remember the altar in the temple. This is a place for sacrifice.

Remember how the entranceways which led to the Most Holy Place progressively got narrower? Remember Jesus who said *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few”* (Matt 7:13-14). There is no higher state, not better place, no more elevated position for people like you and

me than to be in the presence of the Living God. Or to put this in terms of our text, to be in the New Temple.

Look then at the ‘architecture’ of Christ: Perfect in all his ‘measurements’, precise and complete in the entirety of His person and character; without flaw or fault. He is the sacrifice made to enable people like you and me to be declared holy by God. He is the perfect High Priest. *“He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since he always lives to make intercession for them”* (Heb 7:25b). He is the entranceway into the presence of God, into eternal paradise. He said *“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door/gate of the sheep”* (John 10:7).

Have you seen Him afresh today in the details of this vision which has already been fulfilled and will yet be fulfilled in Christ? Will you respond according to the words of our text? Be ashamed of your own sin, repent and believe. Know Christ the New Temple, know His word and diligently seek to obey Him who said, *“If you love me you will keep my commandments”* (John 14:15).

By knowing Christ the New Temple well, you can be assured that the strong walls of Christ will protect you from the unholiness in the common, unbelieving world. By this you will know that you will live in the presence of God now in the temple of His body the church and for eternity as He dwells with His people in the New Heavens and New Earth where all who dwell there will know that the temple is “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22). *He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.* (Rev 22:20-21)

AMEN