

# Excerpts of Archived Lecture:

## The Story of the Tabernacle

By Phil Roberts

The word “tabernacle” means a dwelling place. It does not necessarily connote a sacred dwelling place, but it does usually have the special connotation of a tent-type of dwelling. It could also be used by the Hebrews as a verb. I don’t know if Hebrew boys ever went camping in the back yard or not, but if they did they might have said something like, “Mommy, can Eli and I go tabernacle tonight.”

The story of the tabernacle begins in the garden of Eden. Of course, there is no actual reference to a tabernacle in Eden, but that is where we first find God and man dwelling together in fellowship. It was itself a sort of temple or tabernacle in which Adam (man) had direct access to God, unfettered by sin.

On the identification of the garden of Eden as a type of the temple of God, scholars have often pointed to the role of the cherubim protecting against the entrance of sinful man back into the presence of God. These seem to be analogous to the cherubim which were woven into the curtains of the tabernacle (Exod. 36:35), and especially to the protecting cherubim over the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place, which was also forbidden to sinful man. And the cherubim of both Eden and the tabernacle recall the living creatures surrounding the throne of God in heaven (Rev. 4:6–9). But an even more important key is to be found in the identification of heaven with the garden of Eden in the book of Revelation. Heaven, which is the ultimate temple of God, is there identified likewise as Paradise (2:7), complete with the tree of life (22:2), and a river of life (22:1) which is probably based on the rivers that flowed out of the garden of Eden. In fact, the idea of a river flowing out from the mountain of God on which the temple is built occurs repeatedly in Scripture (Ezek. 47:1–12; Zech. 14:8; Rev. 22:1–2; Joel 3:18; Ps. 46:4, etc.).

Thus, it may be no accident that the only stream that flowed from Mount Zion and the temple in Jerusalem bore the name Gihon, exactly the same as one of the rivers of Eden. Not only that, but the idea of God's temple being built on a mountain, both literally in the case of the Jerusalem temple on Mount Zion, and figuratively in the church (Isa. 2:2; Heb. 12:22) and in heaven (Rev. 14:1; 21:10), can be correlated with the idea that the garden of Eden itself was on a mountain (Ezek. 28:13–14). Some have even suggested that the penchant of ancient peoples to build their temples on high places (either natural or artificial) was a dim reflection of the fact that God had first dwelt with man on a mountain. A common religious image from the Ancient Near East was that of a mountain god depicted with four rivers flowing down from the mountain. Not only that, but the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Gen. 2:14) do in fact take their rise in the mountains of Urartu (Ararat). And if it be objected that Satan was in Eden, remember that he appears before the throne of God elsewhere in the Old Testament as well.

In short, Eden was God's heaven on earth. When man sinned, he lost the heaven or Paradise God had created for him. And the rest of the Bible is the story of God's plan to deliver man from sin and return him to dwell once again in the presence of God, in the new Paradise of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1; 2 Pet. 3:13).

But sin enters the world in Genesis 3. I often remark that if it were not for Genesis 3 the Bible would have ended at Genesis 2. The seemingly absurd simplicity of that statement is intended to emphasize the fact that if man had never sinned the rest of the Bible would never have had to have been written. But man did sin, and the fact that man's punishment for his sin included being *cast out of the garden* is far more significant than we ordinarily realize. It was not just punishment. It was symbolic punishment. Man was being separated from the presence of God. Note that even before Adam and Eve were cast-out they were already afraid and ashamed of themselves in the presence of God (Gen. 3:7–11). Compare their fear and shame with the sense of fear and sinfulness experienced by the priests of the Old Testament when they were in the presence of God in the tabernacle.

The next several chapters of Genesis tell the story of man's progressive alienation from the presence of God. At one point man had so distanced himself from his Creator that God repented of having made man at all and determined to destroy the human race (save Noah and his family). But even when God did that, man still fell right back into sin. The first thing we read of after the flood is Ham's sin against his father Noah, and the next thing after that was the building of the tower of Babel. Thus, we see that man was unable to deliver himself from his sin and return himself to the presence of his God. Even when God wiped the slate clean and gave him a whole new start he still wasted the opportunity.

## **Hope against Hope: Promise of a New Covenant**

In that darkest hour the same prophets who announced God's judgment turned and extended hope that God would yet again dwell with his people, but through a new covenant. The days were coming, said God through his prophet, when:

My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd ... And I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be my people. And the nations will know that I am the LORD their God who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever. (Ezek. 37:24–28)

This new covenant would succeed where the old one had failed. It would succeed because it would be based on the faithfulness of God to his promise to Abraham (Heb. 8:6) rather than on the unfaithfulness of man to the Mosaic covenant. It would succeed because it would be based on a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:14, 23) that really could remove sin. And a real forgiveness of sin would make possible a real restoration of fellowship between God and man. The promise of the new covenant as recorded in Jeremiah speaks not only of this forgiveness of sin, but of Jerusalem being declared "holy to the LORD" (Jer. 31:38–40). In other words, the whole city of Jerusalem will become a holy temple of the Lord under the new covenant.

This will be the basis of the New Testament identification of the church both as spiritual Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22–23) and as the temple of the Lord (Eph. 2:22). Likewise, both city and temple will merge into one in the description of heaven in Rev. 21 and 22.

Ezekiel's extended vision of the future temple (Ezek. 40–48) is to be understood in this same light. It is an idealized picture of the church as the temple for spiritual Israel. As such it far outstrips anything the Jews were ever able actually to build after their return from the Babylonian captivity, thus preventing any possible misinterpretation by those seeking to find its fulfillment in the temples of Zerubbabel or Herod. Indeed, its perfectly balanced dimensions (e.g., the courtyard was a perfect one hundred cubit square, 40:47) find their closest parallel in the symbolic dimensions of the new Jerusalem in Rev. 21:16.

## The Temple of Herod: Empty Grandeur

It is one of the strangest ironies in all the history of God's dealing with his people that the greatest material magnificence ever bestowed upon the temple in Jerusalem was the remodeling of Zerubbabel's temple carried out by Herod the Great just before the opening of the New Testament period. Construction on Herod's temple began about 19 BC and continued until AD 63 cf. John 2:20). It was totally destroyed seven years later. If ever a temple was built to be destroyed, that was it. Sometimes I think **there was only a very thin line between the temple of Herod and the tower of Babel**. And even though Jesus acknowledged it as his Father's house (John 2:16), the only evaluations he ever placed upon it pointed toward its destruction. When its splendor was pointed out to him he merely remarked that soon not one stone would be left standing on another (Luke 21:5–6). Perhaps as the magnificent cathedrals of our own day contrast so sharply with the spiritual emptiness of the denominations that build them, the Herodian temple too, in all its hollow magnificence could be seen as a monument to man's need for the true temple not made with hands (Heb. 9:24). And a bizarre accent mark to the whole situation was the fact that most glorious of earthly temples was built by the irreligious and semi-pagan Edomite ruler, Herod the Great, who also claimed the building of temples to Zeus and Augustus among his accomplishments.

## The Word Became Flesh & Tabernacled among Us

The time had come to leave behind the temples made with hands and all the limitations of the old covenant to which they appertained. The time had come—the fullness of time—for God to provide real and lasting forgiveness for sin. The time had come for God truly to dwell among men. In John 1:1 we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Then we read that this “Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Note the word “dwell.” There are several words that are translated “dwell” in the New Testament. The most common occurs about forty times and has the connotation of dwelling in a house. But **the word used here is rare. It is used only by John, and outside the book of Revelation he uses it only here in John 1:14. It carries the special connotation of dwelling in a tent. The Word became flesh and “tabernacled” among us.**

The Lord had come to his temple (Malachi 3:1). But the temple to which he had come was not really that physical temple of Herod, destined for destruction (though his presence in its courts was probably the closest it ever came to being sanctified and dedicated with the glory of the Lord). Indeed, Jesus could not even enter the Most Holy Place of that temple because he was not of the Levitical priesthood (Heb. 7:13–14). But no matter, for that temple belonged to the old order, which was passing away (Heb. 8:13). **Jesus brought in the presence of his own person the new temple of the new order and the new covenant.** “Destroy this temple,” he said in the midst of the courts of the temple of Herod, “and in three days I will raise it up.” “But he was speaking,” we are told, **“of the temple of his body”** (John 2:20, 22).

Yet we should not make the mistake of thinking that he was simply the *replacement* of the long succession of Old Testament temples. Jesus might have been willing to present himself as a replacement of the Herodian temple in its corruption and earthliness. But he was actually making the much greater claim to be the *fulfillment* and *continuation* of the true Old Testament tabernacle and temple. He was, in effect, claiming that he was the fulfillment of God’s promise through Haggai to make the latter glory of Zerubbabel’s temple even greater than that of Solomon’s temple.

He, in contrast to the Herodian temple, was the continuation of the theme of the dwelling of God among men. But man needs, not simply for God to descend and dwell with him, but, ultimately, for he himself to be able to ascend to dwell with God, for no lasting dwelling of God can be established on this sin cursed earth (Gen. 3:17). Christ, therefore, did not really come to perfect any earthly temple, but to open the door to the heavenly temple, the true dwelling of God, of which all earthly temples are but a model. Thus, when he died on the cross, the veil of the temple in Jerusalem was torn in two (Matt. 27:51). The point of that rending was not to show that access had now been granted to the Most Holy Place of the Herodian temple. Nor do I think it had to do with the coming destruction of the Herodian temple. Rather, like all things pertaining to the earthly temples, it was the earthly counterpart to the heavenly reality. It signified that a sacrifice had now been offered which could provide access to the heavenly sanctuary itself. The animal sacrifices of the Old Testament provided access to the earthly model of God's dwelling place, but the perfect sacrifice of Jesus gives access to the true sanctuary which God pitched and not man (Heb. 9:11–12, 24–28). Thus, as the writer of Hebrews says, "Let us come boldly to the throne of grace ..." (4:16, cf. also 10:19–22).

## **The Temple of His Body: The Church**

At this point we can see more clearly than ever the two levels on which the story of the tabernacle can be told—the earthly and the heavenly, the model and the reality, the type and the true. On the one hand we may follow the resurrected Jesus to heaven (Heb. 1:3; 4:14–15) where he as our high priest is now “a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched and not man” (Heb. 8:1–2).

But, on the other hand, John said that when Jesus spoke of the temple he was speaking of his body (John 2:22). And the “body” of Christ that continued on earth was his church (Eph. 1:22–23; Rom. 12:4; 1 Cor. 12:27). Thus, we continue to have an earthly counterpart to the heavenly reality. Only now the earthly counterpart is no longer a material temple, made with hands, but a spiritual temple (1 Pet. 2:5), not made with hands (Mark 14:58), and therefore that much more like the true heavenly sanctuary.

And, by the same token, it is that much more glorious than its Old Testament predecessors (Hag. 2:9). We are, says the apostle Paul, the body of Christ, “in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19–22).

Notice, incidentally, how this identification of the church as the temple of God helps us to understand the significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Remember that when Moses first erected the tabernacle the **cloud of the glory** of the Lord came down and filled the tent, and remember that the same phenomena was repeated when the Solomon’s temple was dedicated. I believe that cloud of glory was exactly analogous to the Holy Spirit which descended and filled the church on the day that it was erected as the new dwelling place of God on earth. God was taking up residence, through the Spirit (Eph. 2:22), in his new temple. Exactly the same idea is presented in 1 Cor. 3:16 where Paul says to the church in Corinth, “Do you not know that you (plural) are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (Note that “in you” might be translated “among you”.) And in 2 Cor. 6:16 Paul again affirms that “we are the temple of the living God, just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them.’ ”

Seeing the church as the continuation of God’s temple on earth highlights many features of the Christian’s relationship to the church. As the altar stood in front of the temple, and those who would enter could not do so without an appropriate sacrifice for sin, so the sacrifice of Christ stands before the church, and no entrance is possible without that sacrifice. **In all probability the laver of washing which also stood before the door of the temple should be seen as analogous to purification from sin in the waters of baptism** (Heb. 10:22), for no sin can come into the presence of God in his holy dwelling place. And the fact that only priests could enter the temple illuminates the declaration that all Christians are members of a holy priesthood in the house of God (1 Pet. 2:5).

Also, the fact that the church is still only the earthly counterpart to the true heavenly sanctuary carries with it a stern warning. God’s presence in his earthly sanctuaries was always conditional. If his people turned from him he could, and did, withdraw his presence.

God's dwelling with his people in the church continues on that same conditional basis. Jesus said, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him" (John 14:23). I would also suggest that the seven branched lampstand of the Old Testament temple must in some way be the earthly counterpart to the seven golden lampstands in the midst of which Jesus appears in Rev. 1:13. If that is true, then the lampstands of the churches in Revelation would represent God's presence in each of those churches, just as the lampstand represented his presence in the Old Testament temple. To remove a lampstand would signify God's removal of his own presence from one of those churches so that it would no longer be a temple to him. One is reminded, incidentally, of the picture on Titus' triumphal arch in Rome celebrating the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, in which the most prominently displayed treasure is the seven branched lampstand from the Herodian temple. That monument, already erected by the time Revelation was written, would serve as a graphic illustration of God's commitment to remove the lampstand of his presence from a faithless and disobedient earthly counterpart to his heavenly temple.

## **The Tabernacle of God is with Men**

We leave the impression that the tabernacle was a model of the church. That is not true, except in an indirect way. The tabernacle was a model of heaven, where Christ is now. The church is also a model of heaven. The church, in the language of Hebrews, is a better model. It is closer to the spiritual reality of heaven. It is based on a better sacrifice and it is entered by those who have obtained real forgiveness of their sins. But it is still only the earthly counterpart to the true sanctuary, where Jesus our high priest has already entered, and where he now intercedes on our behalf.

And this is the reason for the longing that we have even in this present body (Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 5:2). The church is not the end of the story of salvation. It is not the final place of God's dwelling with man. Though our access to the throne and dwelling of God in heaven is now based on the perfect sacrifice of Christ, our entrance into his presence is still by faith and not by sight.



Our communication is still through prayer and not yet face to face. We are still strangers and pilgrims on this earth (1 Pet. 2:11), our citizenship being in another country (Phil. 3:20), another city (Heb. 11:10), the new Jerusalem. It is the city which John saw in Rev. 21 when, this sin cursed world having passed away, and the new heavens and the new earth having appeared, a voice from the throne declared:

Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. (Rev. 21:3-4)

In conclusion I would note that man has always carried deep within his soul a longing for something that seems to be just beyond his grasp—something he is sure will make him truly happy. In his youth he thinks it is the privileges of adulthood that he longs for. But as he grows up he finds his longing both greater and more elusive than ever. The longing is still there, always just out of grasp it seems.

It is a longing for Eden. It is man's longing for that joy and happiness that he had in the presence of his Creator before sin destroyed the union and drove man from the presence of God. Or, to put it another way, it is a longing for heaven, Paradise regained, where we will finally be brought back to the tree of life to dwell in the presence of him who made us.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, P. (1988). [The Story of the Tabernacle](#). In M. Curry (Ed.), *Hebrews for Every Man* (pp. 65–83). Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Bookstore.