



"If you want total security, go to prison. There you're fed, clothed, given medical care and so on. The only thing lacking ... is freedom."
—Dwight D. Eisenhower

25-Jul-08

Worshipping the Temple (Part Two)

As we saw last week, [Ezekiel 24:21](#) describes Israel as considering the Temple to be something that was beautiful to look at, a national treasure to brag about, one that brought them [joy](#) and glory. It was what they were focused on. Nevertheless, [God](#) declares, "I will profane My sanctuary."

For the southern kingdom of Judah, though, the Temple was more a symbol of security. The Judeans had greater [faith](#) in the fact that God's dwelling place stood in Jerusalem than they had in God Himself. To put it simply, Judah put greater trust in the Temple of the Lord than the Lord of the Temple. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God promises the same destructive result to the kingdom of Judah. However, He elaborates on a slightly different reason:

"Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.' For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt,

then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, commit [adultery](#), swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations'? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the LORD. "But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel." ([Jeremiah 7:4-12](#))

The people declare that there was safety in the fact that they had the Temple, but God calls their assumptions useless and profitless (verse 8). In verses 4 and 8, He says their overt emphasis on the Temple is tantamount to a lie—fatally deceptive. How? Their reliance on the Temple as a supposed guarantor of safety imbued them with false confidence. This illusory sense of security derived from the fact that God had erected His house in their city, and surely, God would not allow His own house to be destroyed! Yet, He asserts that He surely will!

Verses 5-11 list a number of the people's sins, predominately transgressions against fellow men. There is a remarkable connection here: Judah's seemingly unshakable trust in the Temple fostered an abuse of those who were most vulnerable and least able to defend themselves. They felt so secure in God's favor of them—after all, they had the Temple!—that they were not careful in judging between a man and his neighbor. It did not seem to bother them at all to oppress the stranger, the widow, and the fatherless, or to shed innocent blood. To them, stealing, murdering, adultery, and lying were inconsequential because, again, they had the Temple. Idolatry also receives mention, so plainly, their relationship with God was deplorable.

God makes an association that most people miss: that *abuse in relationships occurs when a person trusts in the wrong thing*. Verses 9 and 10 show that the people were behaving as if they had a free pass—a get-out-of-jail-free card. They were sinning against God, apparently believing that He had given

them license to live however they pleased. They took the presence of the Temple among them as God's complete approval of them and the course of their lives.

Their confidence was in their ability to look up and see a magnificent building of stone, cedar wood, gold, silver, and bronze, and know that God was with them. That God dwelt in their city meant more to them than where they stood with Him or whether He was pleased with their direction and conduct. Unwittingly, the Temple—a mere building—became more real to the people than the God it was meant to glorify. By placing their trust and security in the Temple rather than in God, the Temple became an idol—and God destroyed it.

We can see a similar thing in our time and circumstances. If we substitute the phrase "church of God" for "Temple" in the stories of Israel and Judah, many correlations come into view. God's words against Israel and Judah serve as powerful warnings to us, as we are all aware of instances where greater emphasis has been placed on the church rather than on God. The church—whether an organization or the believers with whom we were fellowshiping—became to some more real or more important than the God we were supposed to be coming to know. In many cases, a tremendous amount of security came from the fact of being "in the church." Yet, as we have seen, such a confidence is deceptive and misplaced.

In some corners, church leaders are even making what amount to "guarantees" of safety and deliverance during Jacob's Trouble and the Day of the Lord on the basis of where one attends [Sabbath](#) services and sends one's tithes, rather than on the individual's relationship with God. Idolatry in the form of putting one's trust in a structure commissioned by God—whether physical or spiritual—is bad enough, but encouraging others to do likewise is worthy of even greater condemnation (see [Matthew 5:19](#); [Luke 17:1-2](#); [James 3:1](#)).

Presuming that we will be "kept from the hour of trial" ([Revelation 3:10](#)) because we have reasoned that our church is "Philadelphian" is little different than concluding that Jerusalem was unassailable because it contained the Temple. The truth is, though, that if one's relationship with God is not on good terms, nothing else really matters.

Next week, we will see even more personally how a "Temple" can become an idol—a failing that affects us all.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Fear of God](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The church at large has downplayed the fuller dimension of the fear of God by emphasizing awe, respect, or reverence, while ignoring its other dimensions such as fright, dread, or terror. Consequently, many have inadvertently adopted a soft concept of God, disrespecting and showing contempt for God's authority and power. Mistakenly, we transfer or appropriate our fear to human beings, who cannot revoke the penalty of death hanging over us. When Moses and Isaiah recognized God's presence, they became aware of their own vileness in comparison to God's holiness and power. By legitimately fearing God, we lose our human terror, finding sanctuary in God Almighty. Godly fear is a gift given to us as a result of His calling, compelling submission to His purpose and leading to godly knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

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