

CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 11, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

One of the most remarkable buildings in the history of the world was the Jewish temple. King David conceived the idea of building it, but he was not allowed to do so because he was a man of blood. He did, however, accumulate the vast stores of materials and great amounts of wealth for the temple. But notice the story as the scriptures record it. "Then he called Solomon his son, and charged him to build a house for Jehovah, the God of Israel. And David said to Solomon his son, As for me, it was in my heart to build a house unto the name of Jehovah my God. But the word of Jehovah came to me saying, Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build a house unto my name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in my sight. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about; for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build a house for my name ... Now, behold, in my affliction I have prepared for the house of Jehovah a hundred thousand talents of gold, and a thousand thousand talents of silver, and of brass and iron without weight; for it is in abundance: timber and stone also have I prepared; and thou mayest add thereto. Moreover there are workmen with thee in abundance, hewers and workers of stone and timber, and all men that are skillful in every manner of work: of the gold, the silver, and the brass, and the iron there is no number. Arise and be doing, and Jehovah be with thee." (I Chron. 22:6-10a, 14-16).

Solomon's Temple

The actual construction of this notable building took place during the reign of Solomon which can be dated approximately 1000 B.C. In the book of I Kings, beginning with chapter five and continuing for several chapters, we find the story of the actual construction of what came to be known as Solomon's Temple. First of all, he raised a levy of 30,000 men from all Israel. These were divided into courses of 10,000 each. One group of 10,000 was away from home working in the forests of Lebanon each month. One month they were at work, two months they were at home. In addition to these workers there were 70,000 "bearers of burdens," for the task of bringing the stone and timber from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon down to Jerusalem was tremendous. In order to provide the materials for the construction of the temple there were 80,000 "hewers in the mountains." For this vast corps of workmen there were 3,300 overseers, making a total of 183,300 people who engaged in the construction of the temple.

From Lebanon, over which Hiram, king of Tyre, exercised control, there were brought the "Cedars of Lebanon." In addition, from the quarries there were brought huge quantities of stone. It is interesting to note that both the timber and the stone had been cut to exact measurement. When assembled finally in the temple at Jerusalem it was done without the sound of hammer. It is almost impossible to estimate the number of man hours of labor that went into the procuring of these materials, the transporting of them to Jerusalem, and the placing of them in the temple. A period of seven years was required for these 183,300 workmen to complete the building.

I believe it would be safe to say that the temple cost more per square foot than any other building in the history of the world. In modern times when we think of spectacular new construction like the thirty-two story office building in downtown Nashville, with its cost of seven, eight, or nine millions of dollars, it is interesting to note that the ancient temple of Solomon cost even more though it was a building only ninety feet long, thirty feet wide and forty-five feet high. Part of this tremendous expense is explained by the fact that the interior sections of wood were overlaid completely with gold.

Finally, when the temple was completed Solomon called all the people of Israel together and for a period of fourteen days there was a gigantic national religious celebration. Twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred twenty-two thousand sheep were sacrificed. This means that the blood and a part of the meat was burned on the altar as a sacrifice to Jehovah and that the remaining huge quantities of meat were distributed to the people for their feasting during the period of celebration. When one reads the story of the erection of the temple, culminating with Solomon's prayer and dedicatory address, he feels something of the thrill which the people must have felt when they erected the temple in honor of Jehovah.

The temple was built just short of 1000 B.C. It exercised a tremendous influence on the religious life of Israel for several centuries, but in the year 586 B.C. the Babylonians came, conquered Jerusalem, and plundered and burned the temple.

Zerubbabel's Temple

Half a century later, after the first stage of the Babylonian Captivity, Zerubbabel and a company of Israelites were allowed to return from Babylon to Jerusalem. Because of the kindness of Cyrus, king of Persia, Zerubbabel was allowed to rebuild the temple, which he did during the period from 538 to 515 B.C. This second temple, known as Zerubbabel's Temple did not have the grandeur and richness of Solomon's Temple, as is evidenced by the fact that when the older men who had known the earlier temple saw it they wept. The younger people, who had not known the earlier temple, rejoiced in the reconstruction. Sometime in the second, or possibly the first, century B.C. this temple also was destroyed by the enemies of God's people.

Herods Temple

The third and final Jewish temple, commonly known as Herod's Temple, was begun approximately 20 B.C. Its construction lasted for more than eighty years, continuing throughout the lifetime of our Lord. It was larger than the temple of Solomon though not nearly so grand. Around the central temple there was the Court of the Priests, beyond which there was the Court of Israel, beside which there was the Court of the Women. These courts were surrounded by a stone wall that was both high and wide, almost insurmountable, with entrance possible only at the gates. Outside of this huge wall there was a very large assembly area, known as the Court of the Gentiles, bounded on the outside by a colonnade. While it was possible for Jewish men to go into the court of Israel, it was permissible only for Jewish women to go into the Court of the Women, and the Court of the Gentiles was as far as foreigners might go. On the walls surrounding the inner court there has been found the Greek inscription, "Let no foreigner enter inside the barrier and the fence around the sanctuary. Whosoever is caught will be the cause of death following as a penalty on himself."

The three temples served as the center of Hebrew worship. The "Ark of the Covenant" was kept in the temple until it was lost. The "Holy of Holies" was the place where God came down to contact man in a special way. The temple area was a place to which all loyal Jews made their annual pilgrimage and the only place where it was permissible to offer sacrifices to Jehovah. This, then, was the central edifice in Judaism.

First Cleansing of the Temple

I should like to take you now into the New Testament for the presentation of two brief incidents in the life of our Lord. The first is recorded in the second chapter of John, which indicates unmistakably that it was near the beginning of the ministry of Christ. It is known as his "First Cleansing of the Temple." It happened during Passover week and was the first act of his public ministry in Jerusalem. This event followed immediately his baptism and the working of his first miracle in Cana of Galilee. Here is the story as told by the apostle John, "And the passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And he found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of the money sitting; and he made a scourge of cords, and cast out of the temple, both the sheep and the oxen; and he poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; and to them that sold the doves he said, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house a house of merchandise. His disciples remembered that it was written, Zeal for thy house shall eat me up. The Jews therefore answered and said unto him, What sign showest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things? Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews therefore said, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou raise it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he spake this; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said." (John 2:13-22).

A House of Merchandise

It is rather easy to reconstruct what happened. Jesus, with his perfection of life and his zealous concern for the salvation of men's souls, came into the Court of the Gentiles only to be struck with the tremendous incongruity of the scene. There were the pens in which were kept the oxen and the sheep. There were the cages for the doves. There were the tables with the stacks of money presided over by greedy money-changers. It may have all started innocently enough as a service or convenience for the worshippers who came from afar, but it had degenerated into "corruption and robbery." Possibly it began with the idea of providing animals for those who came from afar in order to save them the difficulty of bringing an ox or a lamb or even a pair of doves over great distances. Undoubtedly the original stalls were outside the city or in one of the narrow streets, but eventually some enterprising huckster moved into the actual temple area, the Court of the Gentiles. Others followed until eventually the court was made a market area.

Not only were they in the wrong place, but greed and avarice had conquered their better natures and they were robbing the people to whom they provided sacrificial animals. It does not take a great stretch of the imagination to visualize a man bringing a lamb which he has chosen from his flock only to find that the priest turned it down, telling him that he must go and buy an acceptable lamb from one of the stalls. It is interesting to note that the family of Annas, who was often high priest and who exercised tremendous influence through the better part of a century in Jerusalem, was engaged in the selling of sacrificial animals. It would be easy to see how the priest might cooperate with the tradesmen and each make fat profits. The money-changers, likewise, were tempted to gouge their customers, for the Roman coins in which business was generally carried on were not acceptable for temple gifts. The Roman denarius had to be exchanged for the shekel and the half-shekel acceptable to the priests. It is easy to see how moneychangers, confronting this necessity on the part of the worshippers, might charge exorbitant exchange prices.

In any case, Jesus, who knew not only the visible acts but also the hearts of the people, was moved with righteous indignation. He made a scourge, and drove out the animals and their greedy masters. Visualizing the scene, one is struck with the fact that Jesus must have been a man's man or he could not have single handedly driven out this whole host of tradesmen. One can almost see him stride through the crowd, throwing down the bars of the pens, opening the doors of the cages; and upsetting the cages stacked high with money. Sending their coins rolling in every direction. No one dared lay a hand on him.

The disciples recognized in what they beheld a fulfillment of the prophecy of Psalm 69:9, "Zeal for thy house shall eat me up." The Jews asked, "What sign showest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?" Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." They misunderstood this veiled meaning and answered, "Forty and six years was this temple in building. and thou wilt raise it up in three days?" This, within itself is interesting, for the construction of Herod's temple began B.C. 20 and Christ's ministry began A.D. 26 or 27. One finds a confirmation of the correctness of the date from the mouths of these critical Jews.

Jesus spoke of the temple of his body. Years later, when he had been crucified and raised from the dead on the third day, his disciples recognized that this statement referred to his own body. We can see, with remarkable clarity, that he was answering the question of the Jews by saying that his authority for cleansing the temple was to be confirmed by the fact that he was raised from the dead, unmistakably showing that he was God's Son. His authority came from God whose Son he was.

The Second Cleansing of the Temple

The other incident to which I referred is very similar, for it is the "Second Cleansing of the Temple" recorded in Matthew 21, and also in Mark and Luke. This incident came during the final week in Christ's life, which means that Christ's ministry was bounded at the beginning and at the end by the cleansing of the temple. The account in Matthew is as follows, "And Jesus entered into the temple of God and cast out all them that bought and sold in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold the doves; and he saith unto them, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer: but ye make it a den of robbers. And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children that were crying in the temple and saying, Hosanna to the son of David; they were moved with indignation, and said unto him, Hearest thou what these are saying? And Jesus saith unto them, Yes, did ye never read, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise? And he left them and went forth out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there." (Matt. 21:12-17).

Conclusions

There are three major conclusions that we should like to draw from the stories of the cleansing of the temple.

(1) The enemies of the Jews did destroy the temple (the Babylonians in 586 B.C, someone else in the first or second century, and the Romans in 70 A.D.), but the leaders of the Jews had already destroyed the heart of the Jewish religion. By their corruption they had already ended the acceptable worship of Jehovah. In each case the enemy was only a scourge in the hand of God for the punishment of unfaithful Israel. The temple was supposed to be a radiating center of spiritual power, a blessing to all of the people. In Christ's day, however, the temple was trying to live on and for itself. Consequently it has died. This is strikingly clear when one reads anew the story of the children crying out, "Hosanna to the son of David." The Jews came to Jesus and said, "Did you hear what these children were saying, it is blasphemy?" They were blind, however, to the real blasphemy of their own lives.

(2) Christ was moved to righteous indignation. Christianity should be known by its enemies as well as by its friends. When we consider Christ as mild, indulgent, and weakly good natured, we have a misconception of the Lord. Where sin was concerned there was righteous indignation and vigorous condemnation. Not only our text, but the woes pronounced in Matthew 23 are evidence of this. When men think that Christ "can be imposed upon" and "that anything goes" they are simply getting ready for a tremendous jolt at the Judgment. While Christ is infinitely loving and infinitely kind, he is also infinitely just and his justice demands that evil be condemned.

(3) The most meaningful conclusion, however, from this study comes through the drawing of a parallel between the physical temple in Jerusalem and the temple of man's soul. The apostle Paul wrote, "Know ye not that ye are a temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, and such are ye." (I Cor. 3:16-17). In a very real sense Jesus came into the world to cleanse the hearts of men. The cleansing of the temple can be a symbol of a far more significant act. As in ancient Jewish history the magnificent temple had been corrupted by the sins of the world, so the pure and holy temple of man's heart has been corrupted by the influences of the world. Man, made in the image of God, has lost his purity and must be cleansed. Christ shed his blood on Calvary that he might cleanse our hearts and souls.

When you think of the cleansing of the temple, therefore, think not of something which happened in the long ago, but rather think of that which happens every day and every hour when men give themselves to Christ. Symbolically, the cleansing of the temple goes on in thrilling fashion and will go on until the end of time.

If you are not a Christian why not come to the Lord at this hour and let him cleanse you? Believe in him as the Son of God, repent of your sins, confess him before men, and be baptized. His precious blood will cleanse and save you.