

## Teaching for 12-19-07

### The Empty Temple

There is a fascinating portion of the Christmas story that often gets overlooked, yet it is a profound statement on the condition of the “Church” at the time of Jesus’ birth as Messiah. There was a desperate need not only for His presence in a lost world, but also in the supposed dwelling place of God—the Temple.

In Luke 1 we find the story of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist. As a priest, Zechariah was to enter the Temple and burn incense before the Lord. In God’s providence, he was chosen by lot to be the one at this particular time to attend to the Temple. As the familiar story goes, Zechariah was confronted by the angel Gabriel as he performed his duties. But an overlooked part of the story is that when Zechariah entered that day, the Temple was empty! There were accessories and furniture present, but *it was empty of the glory of the Lord!*

The more tragic part of this story is that Zechariah and other priests of the day seemed to act as if this was normal! They had become so used to the lack of the Lord’s presence that they assumed it was fine to go about business as usual at this moment in history.

To understand this void, we need to go back and look at some Scripture passages that will shed light on what was supposed to be happening in the Temple in the days of Zechariah and his contemporaries.

#### God’s Intention for His Temple

Back in the book of Exodus, God gave Moses the instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle. It was to be the place where Jehovah would dwell in the midst of His people. In Exodus 30:6, the Lord tells Moses that the Ark of the Covenant *is where I will meet with you*. The incense was to burn in the Tabernacle continually (vs.7-8), speaking of the continuing presence of God. At the completion of the Tabernacle (Ex. 40:35), we read that *the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle*.

Later, Solomon built the more permanent Temple. True to His purposes, God came in glory—and His glory filled the Temple (2 Chronicles 5:14). However, over time the people of God turned away from Him and sin filled the land—and even the Temple. The prophet Ezekiel describes in Ezekiel 10 how the glory of the Lord departed the Temple. The people of God were sent into exile because of their sin. Even though they returned according to God’s promises and built a second Temple—the one in which Zechariah was ministering—there is no evidence that the glory of the Lord ever returned to fill the Temple as it had been previously.

Tragically, generations passed as God’s people came to worship at a Temple that was empty of the glory of the Lord. Children and grandchildren of these generations came and went, believing that an empty Temple was the norm. It had always been that way, and so it did not seem odd that proper religious duties were being performed daily in a Temple devoid of the Lord’s presence.

So when something actually supernatural occurred in the Temple (the appearing of the angel

Gabriel), Zechariah was filled with shock and fear. In the midst of religious perfunctory duties, there was no expectation of the supernatural. Although there are indications that a rope was tied around a priest's ankle when he entered the Temple "just in case," there was no evidence that the glory of the Lord was ever truly present.

### **Some Similarities for Today**

Could it be that we are very much like those first century people of Israel? Is it possible that the true glory of the Lord has been missing for so long in our churches that we think His absence is normal? Many churches today would experience shock and fear if something "supernatural" happened. If there was some "out of the ordinary" miraculous healing or manifestation of God's presence, many of us would react as Zechariah in fear and unbelief.

Yet, the reality is that it is impossible for God to truly show up in His manifest glory without it being supernatural or extraordinary! It was that way at the first Christmas. There were bright stars in the sky with angel choruses interrupting an ordinary evening. Unusual angelic appearances invaded the lives of Mary, Joseph, and Zechariah. Although we think of Jesus' birth as the quiet, understated stable experience, it was accompanied by extraordinary spiritual evidences of the mighty working of God.

### **Growing Anticipation**

Do we live with an expectation of the presence and working of God in our lives and our churches? Do we anticipate God's glory being expressed in supernatural and out-of-the-ordinary ways? Or have we grown accustomed to the lack of His presence to the point of thinking that this is "as good as it gets"?

There are many believers in our day living with a growing sense of anticipation that something is just around the corner. The more one prays, the more one senses that God is about to do something amazing. Are you praying and watching with eager expectation for God's glory? Perhaps it is time that we cry out with a new unity of heart and spirit: *Come, Lord Jesus!*