

David Meiklejohn

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Building the Temple

1 Kings 5-6

Introduction

We're used to seeing ancient Greek or Roman statues as finely carved marble, pure white. And for a long time that's what we thought they'd always been like. But recent studies have found the remains of paint on many statues. It turns out that they were actually very brightly coloured to start with, and the paint has weathered away over the years.

Similarly we see the great pyramid as a stepped structure made of limestone slabs. In fact we know that the whole pyramid was once clad in white limestone, possibly capped with a copper point. It would have shone like a beacon for miles around. In this case it wasn't so much weathering as light-fingered locals that caused the loss of the beauty. The limestone was very valuable.

The lesson here is that if we want to preserve the beauty of something then we should keep the treasure on the inside. When Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun, there was nothing external to hint at the wonders within. It was only as he broke through the door and held an oil lamp at the hole that the glitter of gold was revealed for the first time in centuries.

We've been studying 2nd Corinthians in the morning lessons, and we just read in chapter 4 about the treasure of the gospel, which God chooses to keep in jars of clay. That's us, and the treasure is within. Paul says:

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. [2 Corinthians 4 v 6]

He says:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. [2 Corinthians 4 v 7]

And later:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. [2 Corinthians 4 v 16]

It's what is inside that is important. Our bodies might be failing day by day, but our souls are being renewed daily. The treasure is on the inside.

We're going to see that that's how Solomon's temple is built too as we look into these two chapters.

Background

We're four years into Solomon's reign now. We thought in chapter 3 of the four pillars he was going to strengthen the kingdom on: political strength, regal strength, religious strength and military strength. Last week Neil took us through chapter 4 as we saw Solomon put his government in place, making wise choices for his ministers and building up that political strength. This week we're going to see him building the temple, a focus for the religious activities of the Israelites.

In future weeks we'll see him building his palace, and also equipping the temple. This week we look at the building of the temple itself. In chapter 5 we read about the preparations for the work, and then chapter 6 describes how the temple was constructed.

Preparation - chapter 5

It was David's dream. Back in 2nd Samuel 7 we saw his desire to build a house for the Lord:

Now when the king lived in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." [2 Samuel 7 v 1-2]

But God didn't want David, a man of war, to build such a sacred structure. He promised him that his son would build it, and allowed him to make some preparations. In chapter 5 we find Solomon picking up on these preparations and pushing them on. And we again find him making lots of good decisions on the way.

- **Make use of your friends** - King Hiram had been David's friend and wanted to help Solomon. In verse 1 we find him sending his servants to Solomon, and Solomon replies with a message that he wants to start preparing the wood for the temple. Lebanon, which includes Tyre, is famous for its cedar trees, and Solomon asks for cedar to be cut for the temple.
- **Recognise the skills that people have** - in verse 6 we read:

Now therefore command that cedars of Lebanon be cut for me. And my servants will join your servants, and I will pay you for your servants such wages as you set, for you know that there is no one among us who knows how to cut timber like the Sidonians. [1 Kings 5 v 6]

Solomon recognised that these Sidonians had a good reputation. They were renowned for cutting cedar and he was willing to pay for a job well done.

- **Remember logistics** - it's one thing to cut down lots of trees but how do you get them to the building site? Hiram was experienced and knew that floating them down the sea from Tyre to Joppa would be the easiest route.
- **You pay for quality** - we learn from verse 11 that Solomon paid 20,000 cors of wheat and of oil each year to Hiram. A cor is roughly a sack full. This wasn't cheap but Solomon was willing to pay for the best for the Lord's temple.

- **Treat your workers well** - in verse 13 we find that 30,000 men are drafted into work helping to cut the timber. But notice that Solomon has them working in shifts - a month in Lebanon and two months at home. He is using his workforce wisely.
- **Build on strong foundations** - wood was good for the interior, but stone was needed for the foundations. Solomon sent out his men to quarry and dress the stone, ready to be used to hold up the full weight of the building.

These are not particularly religious choices, but we see the wisdom of God at work in Solomon as he plans and prepares for this project. As we build up our church not all the decisions are about theology and scripture. We also need people who can plan, administer, buy the teabags, fix the electrics. Wisdom is needed in lots of areas.

Building - chapter 6

In chapter 6 we get to work, and we get a detailed description of the temple as it is built.

The central building is rectangular, with a separate room at the end. This cube-shaped is the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant will be placed and where the high priest will go in once a year into the presence of God.

There's a porch built onto the front of the central building, providing a grand entrance way. Solomon builds a set of rooms around the edge of the temple. There are three stories of these rooms, 5, 6 and 7 cubits wide, with beams of cedar resting on the stepped outside wall of the central building.

Notice what it tells us in verse 7:

When the house was built, it was with stone prepared at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the house while it was being built. [1 Kings 6 v 7]

The stone was cut out, shaped and prepared at the quarry. When it came to Mount Moriah it was just lifted into place, so there was no noise of hammering or chiselling at the temple site. You know, there is great reward to those who do ordinary tasks in a reverent way, as if to the Lord. In Colossians, Paul urges the church:

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, [Colossians 3 v 23]

Let's have a look at the detail for the inside of the temple. This starts in verse 14:

So Solomon built the house and finished it. He lined the walls of the house on the inside with boards of cedar. From the floor of the house to the walls of the ceiling, he covered them on the inside with wood, and he covered the floor of the house with boards of cypress. He built twenty cubits of the rear of the house with boards of cedar from the floor to the walls, and he built this within as an inner sanctuary, as the Most Holy Place. The house, that is, the nave in front of the inner sanctuary, was forty cubits long. The cedar within the house was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers. All was cedar; no stone was seen. [1 Kings 6 v 14-18]

So we have this building made of stone. But inside the building it is lined totally with wood. Cedar on the walls and cypress on the floor. Cedar is light, easy to work with, and resistant to warping, so it is ideal for panelling the walls of a house. It also has a spicy scent, so entering the temple would have been a pleasant sensation for the nose.

Cypress is a durable wood, ideal for flooring, and also gives off a pleasant scent.

The inner sanctuary he prepared in the innermost part of the house, to set there the ark of the covenant of the Lord. The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high, and he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid an altar of cedar. And Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure gold, and he drew chains of gold across, in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with gold. And he overlaid the whole house with gold, until all the house was finished. Also the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with gold. [1 Kings 6 v 19-22]

So we have the stone walls and floors, lined with fragrant wood, carved into ornate shapes on the walls, and then the whole lot overlaid with gold. Now imagine coming into the house of the Lord. The light coming in through the windows and shining out from the lamp stands reflecting off the golden walls makes the whole place glitter and glow. The sweet smell of the woods gives a warmth to the atmosphere, along with any incense being burned on the altar. Ahead is the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant will sit. Let's read more about that.

In the inner sanctuary he made two cherubim of olivewood, each ten cubits high. Five cubits was the length of one wing of the cherub, and five cubits the length of the other wing of the cherub; it was ten cubits from the tip of one wing to the tip of the other. The other cherub also measured ten cubits; both cherubim had the same measure and the same form. The height of one cherub was ten cubits, and so was that of the other cherub. He put the cherubim in the innermost part of the house. And the wings of the cherubim were spread out so that a wing of one touched the one wall, and a wing of the other cherub touched the other wall; their other wings touched each other in the middle of the house. And he overlaid the cherubim with gold. [1 Kings 6 v 23-28]

As we pass through the entrance to the most holy place we come into this room dominated by these two massive statues. Their wings cover the full width of the room. They're about 15 feet high, towering over the viewer. And they're coated in gold like everything else so they shine. But they are not the focus of the room. In between them will be placed the ark of the covenant: with the mercy seat where the high priest will pour the blood of the sacrifice as an atonement for the people.

Now look at some of the detail:

Around all the walls of the house he carved engraved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms. The floor of the house he overlaid with gold in the inner and outer rooms.

For the entrance to the inner sanctuary he made doors of olivewood; the lintel and the doorposts were five-sided. He covered the two doors of olivewood with carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers. He overlaid them with gold and spread gold on the cherubim and on the palm trees.

So also he made for the entrance to the nave doorposts of olivewood, in the form of a square, and two doors of cypress wood. The two leaves of the one door were folding, and the two leaves of the other door were folding. On them he carved cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, and he overlaid them with gold evenly applied on the carved work. He built the inner court with three courses of cut stone and one course of cedar beams. [1 Kings 6 v 29-36]

The floors were coated in gold as well as the walls. And everything was intricately carved with angels, palm trees and flowers. The doors were folding ones, a bit like our wooden outer doors on the church building here. We know that the tabernacle had a curtain between the outer and inner rooms. The passage here tells us that doors separated them, but we read in 2nd Chronicles that a curtain was made of fine linen with blue, purple and crimson yarn, so I imagine that the doors opened to reveal the curtain, and the high priest would then pass through the curtain into the holy of holies.

The whole place was a feast for the senses, and the beauty was all on the inside. Only the priests were allowed in to experience it. And only the high priest would see in the holy of holies.

In 1 Corinthians 6 we read:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. [1 Corinthians 6 v 19-20]

I wonder if we've ever stopped to think about what that means. Oh, of course it means that the Spirit of God dwells within every Christian. But think of the work of transformation he is doing in there. Think of the detail he is carving into our inner selves. Think of the strong foundations of stone, overlaid with the sweet smelling wood, intricately carved with beautiful patterns, and all overlaid with gold, to reflect the glory of God. Perhaps as we think of this it can distract us from our failing external bodies and help us focus on what God is doing on the inside.

The final verses tell us that it took 7 years to make this building. Hopefully we can appreciate the work that was done. But let's look back on a section I skipped over: verses 11-13.

Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon, "Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my rules and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel." [1 Kings 6 v 11-13]

This is one of these covenants that we spoke about a few weeks back. This one is a conditional covenant between God and the Israelites. If they continue to walk in his paths, following the commandments, then he will dwell among them. We're going to find out in future chapters that the Israelites failed to keep their side of the agreement, and God eventually removed his presence from the temple.

We can rejoice that the New Covenant doesn't depend on our obedience. Instead it is based on the blood of Jesus. Because of that sacrifice, God promises that his Spirit will live within all who are his, and that he will never leave us. He will fill us with his Word, and give us the gospel to overflow to others.

The treasure is on the inside.