

“CONSTRUCTING THE TEMPLE”
by Rom A. Pegram (1/14/18)

We are THE CHURCH! And that means something, folks, especially to God...

- The Church (meaning us) is *not* something that God takes for granted...
- The Church is *not* something that God assumes will be who he wants it to be...
- The Church is something that God cares so much about that he wants to help prepare us to *be* the Church ... *in every way!*

Today, we're going to look at what God's up to in the life of the Church. And, we're going to find out that God is *actively* working to build the Body of Christ—the Church. We are 'under construction.' So, let's listen now to the words of the Apostle Paul as he describes to the church in Ephesus what God is up to...

Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called “uncircumcised heathens” by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. ¹² In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. ¹³ But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. ... ¹⁶ Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. ... ¹⁹ So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. ²⁰ Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. ²¹ We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. – Ephesians 2:11-14, 16, 19-21 (NLT)

Those words were written by the Apostle Paul, who God had painfully formed into the disciple that he needed him to be. But, *before he was Paul, he was Saul*—Saul of Tarsus. Just to refresh your memory, the first time Saul of Tarsus is mentioned in the Bible is at the stoning of Stephen—in the book of Acts. He is initially introduced at the first execution of 'one of those Christians.' The anti-Christian Jews (which Saul was a part of) were stoning Stephen to death because of blasphemy. Scripture tells us (Acts 7:58, NLT):

“Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him ⁵⁸ and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

Saul of Tarsus approved of the execution of Stephen (see Acts 8:1), as he looked on and held the others coats. He soon moved beyond just observing the death of

Christians, however, becoming a vital part of the persecution of Christ-followers! Here's what it says a little later on in Acts (8:3, NLT), *right after Stephen's burial*:

"But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison."

Saul, now, wasn't just a part of the persecution; he had become the main catalyst for the continuing persecution of Christians *everywhere*! Listen (Acts 9:1-2, NLT)...

"Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. ² He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains."

At this time, *Saul of Tarsus was the #1 Enemy of the Christian Church*! And, just when he was on a roll ... climbing higher in the political ranks of Judaism ... *something happened*! It was so powerful that it not only changed the life of Saul of Tarsus, but I dare say the whole Church from that point forward. *Saul had a personal encounter with the Lord ... Jesus Christ* (Acts 9:3-5, 8a, NLT)! Here it is:

"As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?' ⁵ 'Who are you, lord?' Saul asked. And the voice replied, 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!' ... ⁸ Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind."

Folks, just imagine this scene: A blinding light—brighter than anything else you could ever imagine, brighter than anything you've ever seen before in your life! We don't know exactly how this all came about, but scripture does tell us that *Saul fell to the ground and went blind* in the process. Then, Saul hears a voice begin to speak to him... What was he thinking at this point?

- Maybe Saul thought that someone had come back from the dead to haunt him ... like Stephen or one of the other Christians that he'd helped put to death!

So, Saul cries out: "Who are you, lord (meaning 'sir')?" Then came the unexpected response: "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!"

Folks, Saul could have very easily said, at this point, 'But, Jesus, I've never even met you' (which he probably hadn't in person)! Here's my point in retelling this story: *Saul, a very devout and religious man of his day, didn't realize just who it was that he was persecuting!*

- He saw a total 'disconnect' between Jesus ... and those who followed him...
- But ... *Jesus doesn't see that 'disconnect,' does he?*

Do you remember what Jesus said in Matthew 25:40 (NLT)? This helps explain how Jesus feels about those associated with him...

“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’”

For Jesus, WE ARE HIS BODY! *HOW MEMBERS OF HIS BODY GET TREATED, EVEN BY ONE ANOTHER, MATTERS TO JESUS!* In other words, *when Jesus told Paul on that Road to Damascus, “Why are you persecuting me?” he meant it!* In fact, Jesus is never ‘disconnected’ from his disciples—those who follow him... WE ARE A BODY; WE ARE A FAMILY ... *closer than most could even begin to imagine...* In light of this, folks, here’s what God is up to right here:

GOD IS BUSY SHAPING US INTO A HOLY TEMPLE. We need help learning how to love God and one another! And, God is not going to live this to chance. Just listen: Ephesians 2:20-22 remind us again: “Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. ²¹ We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a *holy temple* for the Lord. ²² Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.”

These words were written by the man who was once Saul of Tarsus, the #1 Enemy of the Church! Once Saul had a personal encounter with Jesus, he became Paul the Apostle—one who’d learned what God is up to—building the Church into a ‘holy temple’ (people set apart for his purposes)... Here we see that God is in the midst of a divine building project—building us—the Church—into something that he deeply desires for us to be! But, WHY ... you might be asking; *why is God busy building us into a ‘holy temple?’* Well...

GOD HAS A VERY IMPORTANT REASON FOR SHAPING US INTO A HOLY TEMPLE! The Apostle Peter picks up on what Paul was teaching to the Ephesians; here Peter explains the reason *why* God is in the midst of this divine construction project—building a ‘holy temple’ (1 Peter 2:4-5, NIV): “As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a *spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*”

Why is Jesus busy making us into a holy temple—a spiritual house? We just read the answer in Verse 5 (1 Peter 2:5): “...you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house (Peter’s word for ‘temple’) ... to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

There it is! The reason the Lord is building us into a ‘holy temple’ is so that we might *be* a holy priesthood ‘to offer spiritual sacrifices.’ What does that sound like to you? It

sounds an awful lot like *WORSHIP* to me! The purpose of God's construction project ... building us into a 'holy temple' ... is so *that we might be prepared to worship him!* Folks, *WORSHIP is something that is so important in our relationship with God ... that God is busy preparing us for this very important act! God is preparing us to worship him 'in spirit and in truth.'* And, if it's so important to God that he's willing to prepare us for the very act of worship—to build us into a worshipping people, then it should be that important to us, too! Don't you agree?

Saul of Tarsus learned that there is no 'disconnect' between Christ and the Body of Christ—the Church (meaning the people). *If you bruise them, you bruise him.* The question today is: Have we learned that lesson? Have we allowed God to make us into a 'holy temple,' ready for worship in every way ... *including our attitudes toward one another?*

The Apostle Paul, whom God had made into a 'holy temple,' once said (Rom. 7:19, NLT): "I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway." So, here's the GOOD NEWS: Repetition of an offense is probably not what severs our relationship with God (and thus affects our worship); *NOT CARING that we repeat an offense ... is what affects our relationship with God and cuts off true worship!* The key with God is always the heart—the *inner attitude that affects our outward behavior...*

Today let the cross of Christ remind you of this: ***Our horizontal relationships—with others in the Body of Christ—will affect our vertical relationship with God!*** Again, the Lord is most concerned with the heart (what's inside). However, that being said, *what's on the inside must eventually make it to the outside (see James, Chapter 2:17-18)!* How are we treating those in the Body of Christ?

The truth is ... we can willingly and willfully do spiteful things to others in the Church (like Saul was). When we do, we not only alienate ourselves from people, but we also run the risk of alienating ourselves from God! And, worship—*true worship*—is impossible when we're alienated from the One we worship...

In contrast, however, we can recognize the error of our ways, repent and *ask God to help us to change.* The choice is ours... We choose whether we'll help God build the temple OUT OF LOVE ... or destroy it. Which will it be? How are we going to WORSHIP in this place?