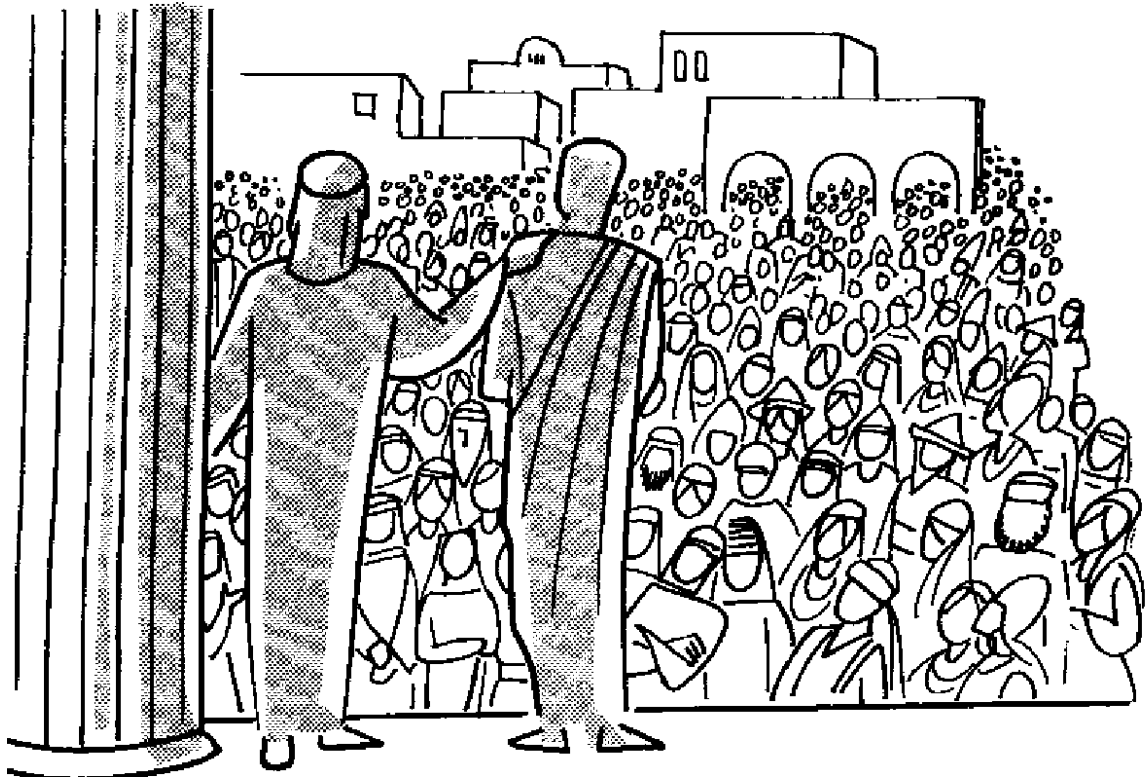


PILLARS FOR GOD



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by Brian Johnston

1. A MEMORABLE START

Imagine a lonely stretch of desert. The sun's going down, setting on a weary traveller as he makes his journey. It seems like he's dragging his feet, definitely tiring as night begins to fall. It looks as though it's been a hard day. Occasionally he still glances backwards, as if there's something on his conscience. It certainly looks as though he's a man on the run from something – or someone.

Perhaps you've guessed already – this man is none other than Jacob; fresh from deceiving his father and cheating his brother as described in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. He had tricked his older brother out of the firstborn son's blessing. It's no wonder his brother had threatened to kill him! But his mother, who had helped Jacob to cheat on his brother, had also helped him prepare for this escape. He was off to her distant relatives to lie low for a while until his brother's anger cooled.

Perhaps we could say that Jacob's mood and general frame of mind at this point would have matched perfectly the bleak and barren surroundings in which he now found himself. He must have felt pretty wretched and homesick –

for all except his brother Esau, of course! But what did the future hold for him now? Things had not worked out as smoothly as he'd hoped. Did he have regrets? We don't know.

One thing's for sure. When we think of the character and background of this man Jacob, we're hardly prepared for what happens next. Indeed, later in life, Jacob himself would say, *"I'm unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You [God] have shown to Your servant"* (Genesis 32:10). We can all say "Amen" to that, of course, but the point is that Jacob seemed to recognize that his past conduct hardly fitted him for the stupendous revelation with which God was about to grace him.

God is gracious, and he was going to give to this man – to Jacob of all men - an amazing revelation. Here's the very first clue when we read, in Genesis chapter 28, that Jacob came 'to a certain place' – it was just as the sun was setting that night. Obviously, this wasn't just any old place. The Bible calls it a 'certain' place.

Well, let's find out together about this place. This is, in fact, the first ever mention in the Bible of 'the house of God', because Jacob

called the name of that place Bethel (meaning house of God). 'That place' must have been really special to God. Why? Because he mentions it no less than six times at this point in the Bible. At that time it was 'the' place of worship! – God's chosen place out of all the earth.

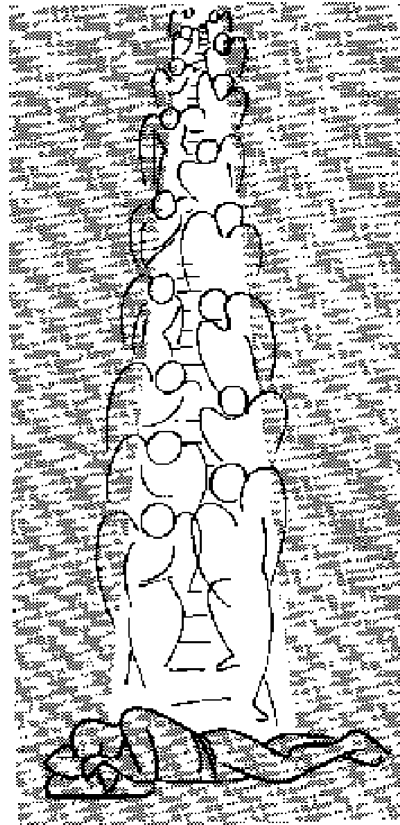
It's no wonder Jacob renamed it – for we read: *previously the name ... had been Luz* (Genesis 28:19). And for others it would remain Luz. They would see no difference: simply because there was nothing outwardly impressive-looking about the place God chose. Here again is the lesson we're taught so many times in the Bible: God doesn't see things the way we do.

Jacob learnt that a place of worship doesn't need to be grand to look at. In fact, a most nondescript place becomes the place of God's choice here. While there was practically nothing for passers-by to see, it would from now on always be a special place to Jacob - a place he would return to later in life. But, it's not yet special to him as he settles down to sleep.

While he slept, *He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD ...* (28:12-15)

So, here - in the most unlikely of settings, Jacob encountered God. God spoke to him in a dream. Jacob had no doubt that it was God speaking to him. Let's look at that in a bit more detail. For when Jacob awoke, he said: *"... the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven"* (vv.16,17).

Evidently, this was more than a physical awakening; this was also a spiritual awakening for Jacob: he had awakened to the fact that he'd actually rested in the place where God rests! – the place where God's presence is accessed in a special way. That's why he says, "How awesome is this place!"



This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Imagine not being aware of being in the gate of heaven! It seems that he had stumbled upon it, but surely God had led him to this special place where God resides on earth and from where God's presence in heaven can be accessed. Yet remember, this place on earth was nothing to look at from a human point of view.

But what was Jacob's response to all this? He took the stone he had been using overnight as a pillow, and set it up now as a memorial pillar, saying in Genesis 28:22 : *"this ... pillar shall be God's house."* This was his way of reverencing the LORD – by setting up a memorial stone or pillar, and consecrating it by anointing the top with oil, while naming the place Bethel ('house of God'). He also made a vow, declaring, for the first time, his faith in, and personal commitment to, the Lord (by promising, "The LORD will be my God"). In fact, he also promised to tithe (v.22) – to give God a tenth of his income to God. So, it was quite a full response, but no more than this amazing experience and major revelation called for.

After all, here was a place disclosed as being 'the house of

God'. Later, in the Bible we find this same name applied to buildings like the tabernacle and temple, and then to faithful believers on the Lord Jesus Christ when we come to the New Testament. But the point is this: whenever we come across this major theme in our Bibles – from Genesis to Revelation – the same features that we first find here in Jacob's first encounter with it, are always true of it.

So what are these unchanging principles which God chose to reveal for the first time in Genesis at the very start of the Bible? Here in the Bible book of beginnings, it's as though God has put down a marker on this topic. What is it that we can learn about the house of God from Genesis chapter 28? Let's try to list a few things that come directly out of this story. Jacob was awakened to the fact that the house of God is a place on earth:

- chosen and revealed by God – not by anyone else;
- and it's where God's will is done – not a do-as-we-please kind of place, no matter how sincere are our motives;
- and it's clearly a place where God's presence is experienced in a special way;
- a place of worship, where worshippers are to show a reverent approach to God;

- for it's a place characterized by God's own holiness (see later in Genesis 35);
- and, on our part, it ought to be marked by blessing and commitment – as it was here in Jacob's case.

Remember, Jacob was on a journey when all this befell him. Little did he know when he set out on that desperate flight that God would lead him to the house of God on earth. Some people go all through life and never find it. May I ask you? Are you still travelling en route to God's house? What is your appreciation of it on this earth?

I ask, because there's a reference to it in the New Testament which refers to it as 'the pillar and ground of the truth'. That emphasizes what I mean by this truth being a 'Bible-wide' revelation. For it would be hard not to associate that description of the pillar and ground of the

truth with what we've been thinking about in this chapter as regards the first ever Bible reference to God's house on earth way back in Genesis. From first to last, the Bible is consistent and so, once again now on this topic, a Bible-wide theme emerges.

The New Testament verse we were referring to a moment ago is found in Paul's writings to Timothy. In his first letter, the apostle Paul, says:

I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth (3:15).

Later in this booklet I will explore with you the particular imagery that's used in that verse. But for now the simple recollection of Jacob's memorial stone will serve as our first marker in the topic of pillars.

2. A STRONG COMMITMENT

A declaration of martial law; an attempted coup; a forceful squashing of a populist uprising led by religious figures; former leaders returning from exile – all events which in recent times have captured the world's headlines.

If we transport ourselves back in time to the days of the kings of Israel – to the days of a southern king by the name of Ahaziah, things would in some ways be little different from the lawlessness of our own time. For, when king Ahaziah was killed, his mother, Athaliah, did a very wicked thing. She seized the reins of power for herself, and set about destroying everyone who had a rightful claim to the throne.

But one of them escaped – or, at least someone must have helped him, for he was still only a baby son of the king who had been killed. Baby Joash was hidden away in a bedroom while the slaughter of the king's descendents was taking place. For the next six years he was kept tucked away from view in God's house – of all places – which, at that time, was the temple at Jerusalem. Perhaps no one would think of looking there. This is how the Bible sums it up:

So he was hidden ... in the house

of the LORD for six years, while Athaliah reigned over the land.

In the seventh year Jehoiada [the priest] sent and brought the captains of hundreds - of the bodyguards and the escorts - and brought them into the house of the LORD to him. And he made a covenant with them and took an oath from them in the house of the LORD, and showed them the king's son. (2 Kings 11:3,4 NKJ)

I find that inspiring reading. The man Jehoida, who was a priest, brought the military leaders into the temple and let them into the secret – and what a secret it was: that for all of those six terrible, dark years of oppression, there had been a secret survivor – and he was none other than the rightful king! How those soldiers must have gasped with amazement – and no doubt with relief – at the sight of the young boy who was born to be king! He was someone whose existence had been a closely guarded secret until that moment. From that moment on, something like a military-style coup was launched to bring this young boy to the throne.

Let's remain a little longer with that moment of revelation in the temple. It certainly had come as a

wonderful revelation to those soldiers: to get a glimpse of the king's son in God's house. I'm pausing with you at this point, because I can't help but see an illustration there of something that's right up to date. Do we not live in a time when Satan has usurped God's rightful place in the thoughts and lives of men and women – a fact which recalls for us Athaliah's vile act?

Late on in the Bible, the apostle John says: *the whole world lies under the sway of the evil one* (1 John 5:19). In that sense, the days we live in are dark ones, for this controlling influence which the Bible speaks of is *the power of darkness* (Colossians 1:13). It's tyranny and oppression of a spiritual nature and it's throughout the world system today.

But what a revelation is to be found in our Bibles! – like the revelation Jehoida the priest made to those loyal soldiers. The very best news that anyone in this world can discover is that there's salvation found in a child born and raised in this world, yes: but born and raised outside of the royal palaces of his day. And, further, it's true of this one also that his identity was hidden from all but a few.

If only we, too, can get a glimpse of the King! I'm referring to Jesus Christ, God's Son and the Saviour.

He's the Son of the King of kings. I've come to understand from God's Word, the Bible, that when we come to appreciate the revelation of Jesus as he stands related to God's house today, then we've come to appreciate the full extent of God's good news for the people of this world. It's something I rejoice in as I share it with you - this vision of the King's Son in God's house.

Remember that was the way we also described baby Joash in the Temple. I wonder, did those soldiers in the house of the Lord in the Jerusalem temple long ago, in the exceptional circumstances that saw them ushered in there – did they perhaps catch some glimpse of the glory of the gold in the temple interior? Even if they did, what they saw that day in terms of seeing the young boy king was something even more glorious. Yes, my friend, – as the old chorus says – there's something more – something more than gold. Something which puts all the issues surrounding our commitment to biblical teaching into perspective – it's the glorious vision of the King's Son in the house of the LORD; the view we're given of the Lord Jesus as he stands related to the churches of God which we so often read of in the New Testament of our Bible – churches which in their aggregate – and in their faithful

adherence to God's Word formed God's house on earth, his spiritual dwelling-place.

If the first view those soldiers got of the king's son was of him standing in God's house; then the last view of him which the wicked queen Athaliah had was of him standing next to a pillar. This is how the Bible records the moment:

When [Athaliah] looked, there was the king standing by a pillar [this was after the military coup had been launched to bring Joash to his rightful place] ... according to custom; and the leaders and the trumpeters were by the king. All the people of the land were rejoicing and blowing trumpets. So Athaliah tore her clothes and cried out, "Treason! Treason!" (2 Kings 11:14)

It seems the first that Athaliah knew of Jehoiada's plan was when she heard the noise of the celebration. She went from her palace to the temple to find out what was happening. To her amazement, she saw little Joash (the king) with the royal crown on his head standing by the pillar at the eastern gate of the inner courtyard of the temple, the place the king usually occupied when he spoke to the people in the temple area (cf. 2 Chronicles 23:13). It seems that an elevated platform was provided for the king to stand on when he visited the temple on

festive occasions (cf. 2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chronicles 6:13). This is where Joash stood. The queen immediately understood what was taking place, tore her robes signifying her great distress (cf. 2 Kings 2:12; 5:7; 6:30), and cried, "Treason! Treason!"

Imagine that! She was one to talk, wasn't she? If anyone had committed treason, it was her! But let's continue now with the Bible reading ...

And Jehoiada the priest commanded the captains of the hundreds, the officers of the army, and said to them, "Take her outside under guard, and slay with the sword whoever follows her." For the priest had said, "Do not let her be killed in the house of the LORD."

So they seized her; and she went by way of the horses' entrance into the king's house, and there she was killed. (2 Kings 11:15,16)

What Jehoiada did wasn't treason because Joash was a legitimate heir to the throne. Athaliah wasn't, since she was not a blood descendant of David. She, as we said, was the one guilty of treason. For this reason Jehoiada the priest ordered the commanders to arrest her, to lead her out of the temple area under guard and to kill anyone who tried to help her. It was not appropriate to execute anyone in



the temple area since it was a place of worship (cf. 2 Chronicles 24:20-22). So ended the life of one of the most wicked women in Scripture.

But how fitting that the king stood next to a pillar. Did you notice that? This story is also recorded in the book of Second Chronicles where we're told: the king stood by his pillar at the entrance (2 Chronicles 23:13). Some think this had to do with a support for the scaffold or platform erected by Solomon (2 Chronicles 6:13), though others have supposed it to be the post of the east gate of the inner court (Ezekiel 46:2). I was interested that none I've read seem to think it was either Jachin or Boaz (1 Kings 7:21), the two impressive pillars which Solomon had set up at the porch of the nave of the temple. These pillars were symbolically named in the Bible as representing stability and

strength – or the very idea that God would establish it in strength - referring, very likely, to the temple worship of God's people. But that temple worship was always conditional on human commitment to God's covenant truth – the kind of determination and resolve symbolized in the fact that Joash took his stand alongside that standing pillar. If the pillar represented the strength of God's commitment to his house, Joash was surely giving us a good example by declaring his own commitment.

Joash took his stand by the pillar – whichever one - still a symbol of strength, and most definitely associated with God's house at that time, the Jerusalem temple. That was surely fitting, for he was a king who, for much of his life, took a stand for the truth and sanctity of God's house. It's certainly true, in God's house in

any age, we need to be committed to that which God himself has committed to us (2 Timothy 1:12-14), as when the apostle Paul himself wrote in such terms to Timothy, and spoke passionately at that time of the need to hold onto the pattern of sound teaching found in Scripture.

To his original readership across five Roman Provinces of the New Testament world, the apostle Peter wrote to born-again, baptized, obedient believers on the Lord Jesus addressing them as:

... living stones ... built up as a spiritual house for a holy

priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God ...
(1Peter 2:5)

whom, he later said, would:

perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish [them] (1 Peter 5:11).

In all ages, God looks for strength in his house on earth. It's his desire to see it firmly established, and continuing to take a stand for truth - with believers in it, like young Joash, committing themselves to the ways of God. Believers identified with pillars, not wavering in their allegiance to the things of God.

3. A PASSION FOR TRUTH

I know a young man who's very zealous in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, taking the message to remote, upland parts of his own country. They are areas where an already distorted view of Christ is further corrupted by overtones of ancestor worship. Wherever he encounters groups of children or adults of all ages, he's never happier than when, with Bible in hand, he's passionately sharing its pure teaching with them. I've known him to be slandered and misunderstood, and in response to demonstrate the true grace of God by overcoming these setbacks, while still loving those who oppose him.

I'm reminded of him now, as I read in the Bible about a young man by the name of Josiah. He was king of the southern part of Israel, usually called Judah, and where there was generally a greater loyalty to the ways of God. Circumstances had thrust Josiah onto the throne at the tender age of eight. That could not have been easy for a boy to cope with, even with the inevitable advisers on hand to guide him. But even so, the Bible tells us that he did right in the sight of God. That's to his eternal credit, a wonderful statement

about someone so young. When he was a teenager (at fifteen years of age, in fact) an even deeper spiritual revival seemed to break out in his life, and the Bible records that he began to really seek God (2 Chronicles 34:1-3).

Josiah developed into quite the young reformer with a determined zeal to purge the land of idolatry. He was still only 25 when he made another significant contribution to the outworking of God's purpose both in his life and the life of his people. He did this by urging others to repair the house of the Lord which, in his day, took the form of the Jerusalem temple. The fresh impetus he gave to this produced a most marvellous discovery – the discovery of the Book of the Law from under all the rubble in the temple.

As I think of this, I'm reminded of another young man who by the age of 25 had made a significant contribution towards regaining a proper understanding of God's spiritual house in this present Church age. His name was Frederick Arthur Banks, and he was born in 1861 at Ipswich in England. Sadly, he was not blessed with robust health, but it was a case of God choosing the

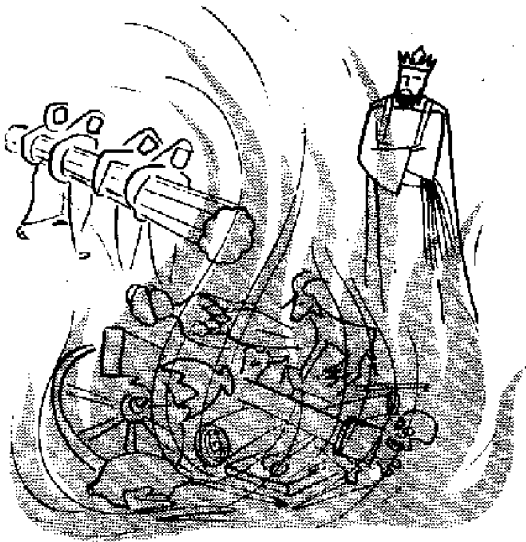
weak things of the world, as he often does. Neither did this young man's parents have the money to give him the benefit of a further education, but his abilities were sharpened in the school of God: alone with the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit became his guide into all the truth. God enabled him to become a clear communicator and he wrote with great impact in the print media of the late nineteenth century. With God-given insight he gave a clear outline of truths he had re-discovered in the Bible – truths that had lain buried under the rubble of centuries of ecclesiastical tradition. In one of his most thought-provoking contributions to the Christian debate taking place around him, he set out a biblically argued distinction between the Church the Body of Christ as being all true believers; and distinct as such from the house of God as the aggregate of the churches of God as found in the New Testament.

His contribution to the understanding of the New Testament gained a following among many which persists to this day. For many came to understand that the Church the Body is every true Christian, including those who have already died; whereas, by contrast, the house of God may not even contain every living Christian. For

example, two thousand years ago we read of the sad New Testament case found in First Corinthians chapter 5, when a member of the Body of Christ was excommunicated from local church fellowship at Corinth. In the Body still, but out of the house.

It was the same in Josiah's day, in that people acted upon the discovery of God's truth within his house. Josiah himself led the way. The Bible makes special mention of his passion and enthusiasm when it says in 2 Kings 23:

... the king [that's Josiah] sent them to gather all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem to him. The king went up to the house of the LORD with all the men of Judah, and with him all the inhabitants of Jerusalem - the priests and the prophets and all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant which had been found in the house of the LORD. Then the king stood by a pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people took a stand for the covenant. (2 Kings 23:1-3)



'And all the people took a stand for the covenant.' How impressive is that! It was a case of like king, like people. What their king did, they did. King Josiah took a stand for the teaching of the book of the covenant: he took a stand publicly to practice all the truth he had rediscovered from the book of the covenant. And the people followed his example.

That's powerful. When did we last reform our ways because of what we've discovered from our reading of God's Word? Commitment to God's Word, even freshly discovered truths, must win out over 'brand loyalty', and must take precedence over cherished notions and long-standing allegiances in God's things – if they don't stand the test of his Word. That's what links the young man I began by telling you about with the biblical king Josiah, and the nineteenth century Englishman by the name of

Frederick Arthur Banks. They stood passionately for freshly discovered truth and were used by God to influence others. They were weak in themselves, but they were like pillars in the testimony they gave – and still give – to the truth of God's Word – especially in relation to the object that was evidently dear to Josiah's heart: the house of God.

Josiah stood by a pillar, we read. A pillar in God's house. The picture invites the comparison. God is looking for pillars in his house. People, like pillars, standing for truth, *steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord* (1 Corinthians 15:58).

It was to the Church of God at Thessalonica that the apostle Paul wrote:

God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. (2 Thessalonians 2:13-15)

Believers standing firm in the house of God – that also reminds me of the tabernacle house for God in the days of Moses, and of how boards were used in its

construction. Exodus 26 describes them:

for the tabernacle you shall make the boards of acacia wood, standing upright. Ten cubits shall be the length of a board, and a cubit and a half shall be the width of each board ... you shall overlay the boards with gold (Exodus 26:15,16, 29)

Picture these boards with me, as they stood on the desert sand. Made out of wood from the acacia tree, they each stood at least fifteen feet tall and measured a little over two feet across in breadth. Board was added to board to make three sides of an oblong building, then a screen was suspended on the side that was left open, and over it all the curtains and skins formed the Tabernacle and tent.

Early Christians – like the Thessalonians - taking their stand for Christ within the fellowship of the New Testament Christian community were just like those Tabernacle boards, for they weren't only standing for their faith as individuals. Have you noticed how often we read of the fact that those early Christian disciples were added together in the New Testament churches of God - just like how the Tabernacle boards were added to each other: board to board?

But how was it those boards

obtained a firm standing long ago? Let's notice what it says in verses 17 and 19 of Exodus 26:

"Two tenons shall be in each board ... [and] two sockets under each of the boards for its two tenons." (NKJ)

We might well wonder what 'tenons' are, so it's worth referring to another Bible version where we read in the same place not of 'tenons' but of ... *two projections set parallel to each other. Make all the frames of the tabernacle in this way. ... two bases for each frame, one under each projection. (NIV)*

So there were bases or sockets on the ground underneath each of the boards: and in each board there were two projections which plugged into the sockets. That gives us, I think, a fair idea of how it was that these boards could make a stand as part of God's house on the desert floor.

And it brings us back to our connection with the believers standing together in the early local Church of God at Thessalonica. For the idea in that Bible word for 'projections' is the idea of a hand, and so of holding – the boards were holding on so that they might be able to remain standing. And is that not the picture in the words the apostle Paul wrote to his friends in the Church of God in Thessalonica?

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

Standing firm by holding onto the teaching of the apostles. May God

help us to stand for the truth of his house, like a pillar and like one of those boards. We can only take our stand for truth in God's house through holding onto the purely biblical traditions, while letting go of mere human opinions.

4. UPHOLDING THE TRUTH

It's the greatest love song in the Bible and it contains the line: *his legs are like pillars of marble* (Song of Songs 5:15). Of course, I'm referring to the Song of Songs, the Song of Solomon. It's pretty clear that the symbolism is meant to convey the idea of the strength and stability of the individual concerned when we read: 'his legs are like pillars of marble.'

And so our thoughts go to the Lord, for these words seem to capture the picture of his solid determination in moving steadily onwards in the path of God's will for him, the path that was ever leading to the cross. Ever onward through life, until at length, he stood before Pilate, the Roman Governor, who asked him:

"Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"

Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the

Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."

Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world - to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him." (John 18:33-38)

It's particularly the words: *"I have come ... that I should bear witness to the truth"* that I'd like you to notice. The Lord's resolve was firm as he declared his mission to Pilate. Like a pillar, he was still upholding the truth, the truth of God's revelation, which centred on himself, of course. And we are to be pillars like the person of the Lord in upholding the truth.

That's never clearer than when the apostle Paul is writing to Timothy, and says:

that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar [from 'to stand'] and ground [from 'to

sit'] *of the truth* (1 Timothy 3:15).

In fact, this goes beyond seeing individual believers as pillars, by viewing them collectively – at least those who form God's house on earth – as together being the pillar of the truth. This brings us back to where we started out in this series. God's house being identified with a pillar takes us back to the Book of Genesis, and the story of Jacob there in chapter 28.

Remember how, while Jacob slept, *He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD ...* (vv.12-15)

And when Jacob awoke, he said: "... the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (vv.16,17)

Then what was Jacob's response to all this? Well, he took the stone he had been using overnight as a pillow, and set it up now as a pillar, a memorial pillar, saying in Genesis 28:22 : *this ... pillar shall be God's house*. This was his way of reverencing the Lord - by setting up a memorial stone or pillar, and consecrating it by

anointing the top with oil, while naming the place Bethel ('house of God').

Later, in the Bible 'house of God' came to be applied to buildings like the tabernacle and temple, and then to faithful believers on the Lord Jesus Christ when we come to the New Testament. In fact, in Hebrews 3:6, Jesus Christ, God's Son, is said to be son over God's house – and then the writer adds 'whose house we are', as he continues addressing those early Christians who were maintaining their faithfulness to the apostles' doctrine.

But the point is this, that whenever we come across this in our Bibles – from Genesis to Revelation – for it's a major theme, close to the heart of God – the same features that we first find in Jacob's first encounter with it, are always true of it, like:

- it's a place chosen and revealed by God – not by anyone else;
- and it's where God's will is done – not a do-as-we-please kind of place – no matter how sincere are our motives;
- and it's clearly a place where God's presence is experienced in a special way;
- and, of course, a place of worship.

Now, with that reminder of Jacob's memorial stone which he

set up as a pillar, calling it God's house, what was that New Testament verse we were referring to a moment ago? It's found in Paul's writings to Timothy. In his first letter, the apostle Paul, says:

I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth (3:15).

Notice that God's house on earth, the church of the living God, is described as the pillar and ground of the truth. It's as if this is a twinned idea, with both thoughts – both pillar and ground - emphasizing the idea of support.

As a column supports the weight of a building – so collectively we bear the weight of responsibility in upholding and supporting the truths of the Faith by our teaching and practice.

We've reminded ourselves how the Lord Jesus told Pilate: *"I have come ... that I should bear witness to the truth."* All who are his true followers now have this same responsibility in the world. For in his final ministry to his disciples, the Lord had promised them concerning the Holy Spirit:

"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:13)

Shortly after, he had then

engaged in prayer for them, saying:

"Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." (John 17:17)

Then with the coming of the Holy Spirit at that first Pentecost, the prayer of the Lord Jesus that night found its answer in those disciples gathered initially into the Church of God at Jerusalem, and then subsequently, into other such churches of God as the gospel spread in those early days.

At times, as the New Testament shows, their commitment to the truth in all its purity was put to the test. The need to strive to uphold the truth is a major theme in Paul's second letter to Timothy, for example. He refers to 'the truth' many times, for example in the second chapter, he says:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some. Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Everyone who

names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness."

Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. (2 Timothy 2:15-21)

These words by the Spirit of God are uncompromising that those who were not handling the Bible accurately, and as a result were spreading wrong teaching, must be dealt with. They had ceased to be like pillars. A cleansing had to take place, whereby the error was put away. The clear meaning here is that there had to be a separation from those who insisted in wrong teaching. For the house of God is the pillar and buttress (ESV) of the truth. God has charged his house on earth with the responsibility of upholding the truth. And it cannot discharge that responsibility if it tolerates error, far less continues to have fellowship with those who teach it. The house must cleanse itself of such dishonourable vessels – that's the language of this passage. Christ: his person,

his work and his teaching as first delivered to the apostles (Acts 1:3) comprise the truth that's to be identified in its entirety with the house of God on earth.

Had not Christ himself declared: *"I am the way, the truth and the life"* (John 14:6)? And those who followed him, the first Christians, came to be regarded as belonging to 'the way' as they gathered in the early churches of God in their various localities. The Apostolic Faith, the body of doctrine, which they were committed to was 'the truth' which they upheld (see 2 Peter 2:2). And so they were encouraged to lay hold on 'the life' (1 Timothy 6:19). And so we have 'the way', 'the truth' and 'the life' seen in Christ and reflected also in his followers.

To faithful overcomers in the church of God at Philadelphia – and surely to all who live their lives in support of the truth of God – is held out the wonderful promised reward:

'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more' (Revelation 3:12).

Surely, we want to make that our aim, don't we?

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