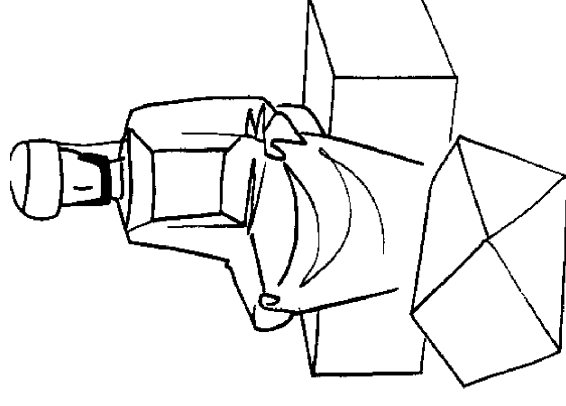


Visions of God's House



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Visions of God's House

by Brian Johnston

1. The Divine Presence

They were dark days in which Zechariah ministered to the people of God. Through the prophet's ministry, and into the midst of the discouragement of the times, God brought messages of hope to his people. This was the time when Jews were busy trying to resettle into their own land, after they had been deported to Babylon for a while. But re-establishing the service of God in accordance with the Word of God seemed, at times, like too much effort.

That was when Zechariah's visions began - visions in which God spoke powerfully to him: visions full of relevance for the predicament, and the mood, the people were in. Let Zechariah share with us the first of the visions God showed him, he says:

I saw at night, and behold, a man was riding on a red horse, and he was standing among the myrtle trees which were in the ravine, with red, sorrel and white horses behind him. Then I said, "My lord, what are these?" And the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "I will show you what these are."

And the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered and said, "These are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth."

So they answered the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees and said, "We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth is peaceful and quiet."

Then the angel of the LORD said, "O LORD of hosts, how long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which You have been indignant these seventy years?"

The LORD answered the angel who was speaking with me with gracious words, comforting words.

So the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "Proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster."

"Therefore thus says the LORD, "I will return to Jerusalem with compassion; My house will be built in it," declares the LORD of hosts. "" (Zechariah 1:8-16)

Notice the key promise there: God assures his people through the prophet, "I will return to Jerusalem ... My house will be built in it". Building God's house was the project in which they were engaged. They were rebuilding the new temple on the same spot where Solomon's Temple

I wonder if the practice of church discipline today has generally fallen into a measure of disuse? If so, the apostles were clearly of a different opinion. Paul spelt out the procedure step by step, even if it does make solemn reading. Of course no-one likes it, but the logic of 2

Thessalonians 3 is clear: if there's to be faithfulness to the pattern God has given - and as followed by those whom he recognizes as forming his house - then we have a corporate responsibility (1 Thessalonians 5:12-14) to carry out discipline, one in which church leaders take the initiative. Its character and tone, of

course, is to be nothing other than friendly and fraternal, for it's always aiming at being re-constructive - to the goal of 'winning our brother'.

Well, maybe we've encircled the mountains of bronze long enough! In concluding this study majoring on the essential ingredients of house-building for God, let's remind ourselves we've not only seen visions of judgement and the supremacy of the Word of God, but also visions of service before God and men, and above all the reminder that God's house is where his presence is specially known.

All Scripture quotes are taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

commands; and if we're steadfast then we'll hold fast to the whole of the apostolic tradition we've received in the New Testament revelation.

Dare we be selective in our obedience? That wouldn't really be obedience at all! For do we have similar authority to the apostles in order to select between what's a fundamental truth and what's a secondary doctrine? What part of the apostolic pattern found in our bibles do we have the right to dispense with? This was obviously a live issue already in Paul's day. Because he goes on to say: *Keep away from every brother who ... does not live according to the (apostolic) teaching.* So it seems some were intent on ignoring what they didn't like.

Perhaps one specific issue for some at Thessalonica was a refusal to work (2 Thessalonians 3:6,8; 1 Thes.4:11), but if that's included as important, what will we exclude as unimportant?

It's perfectly obvious from this that obedience to the Lord within his house demands separation to the apostolic commands as communicated by the preaching of Paul, remembering the assurance given in the chapter that this is in fact the Lord's own message.

When disobedience to the Lord's message has to be acted upon by a separation between the faithful and the unfaithful, we're into the whole subject of discipline in the local church, such as we see illustrated

throughout the New Testament Churches of God. It's not a popular or fashionable subject, but in the logical flow of Paul's teaching here this is where we get to. Church discipline is needed when the Christian standard is defiantly refused. Judgement must indeed begin at the house of God.

In his pastoral letters, but especially here in 2 Thessalonians 3, the apostle Paul spells out the form that discipline takes. He commands them to 'admonish the unruly' (1

Thessalonians 5:14): in other words, a first admonition. Then he says 'keep away' (2 Thessalonians 3:6). That can mean nothing else but a measure of social ostracism if the admonition isn't heeded. If that measure doesn't have the desired effect of correction, the disciplinary measures begin to escalate. 'Take special note' (2

Thessalonians 3:14), Paul says, in what sounds like a public censure. If necessary this is followed by the instruction 'not to associate with' (2 Thessalonians 3:14) those who are disobedient: which clearly means avoiding free and familiar fellowship (v.15). Finally, and solemnly, if all that has gone before has still not produced the effect of correction, he writes that they have to 'reject' (Titus 3:10) them: which amounts to the excommunication we saw in the previous chapter from 1 Corinthians 5, or which would happen in other cases when after a second admonition a brother is to be refused.

had been destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC, some seventy years earlier. The work had its difficulties and there were discouraging times, but now came a tremendous reassurance that the house would definitely be built, for God was promising to be with them again. 'I will return', he said. His presence would guarantee success in the mission as long as their hearts were right before him.

But wait a moment. It's worth pausing right there. Surely this is the most basic characteristic of God's house in any age: it's the place where God's presence is known in a special way. There were times in Bible history when God disowned or abandoned his house. When the Jews of Jesus' own generation proved by their rejection of him that their hearts were far from God, Jesus told them, "your house is left to you desolate" - meaning the temple at Jerusalem was in the process of being disowned by God as no longer being 'his house'. God's house is - has to be - the place where his presence is known. If God's presence is no longer there, then it's no longer his house.

God announced this principle early in Bible history, way back in the Bible book of beginnings, the book of Genesis. This first principle of God's house on earth is disclosed in the story of a weary traveller in Genesis chapter 28. Imagine a lonely stretch of desert with the sun going down.

It's setting on this traveller who might well have been occasionally glancing backwards. There's sin on his conscience. He's a man on the run. This is Jacob running away from the brother he's cheated. Wait! He's stopping now. It looks like he's preparing to spend the night. But what place is this? The Bible simply says:

He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place (Genesis 28:11).

It might have seemed like a kind of nondescript place that Jacob had merely stumbled across. It hardly seemed like a special place at all as Jacob settled down to sleep. But as 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.*

Notice the position of authority the LORD occupied in this revelation. This was a revelation of a place on earth where God's will is done as it is in heaven, a place where God rules. This, for Jacob, was a fresh revelation of God, the God who now said to him:

"I am the LORD ... I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying ... I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land"

(vv.12-15)

When Jacob awoke he exclaimed:

"Surely 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).

In more than a physical sense this was an awakening experience for Jacob. He realizes he's been staying in the very place on earth where God resides. Unconsciously, he had actually laid down to rest in the place where God himself rests! Jacob at once makes a vow of commitment, for he's understood this is the place where God rules. Coming to terms with all this is something Jacob himself describes as an awesome experience. "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it!" This was a place where the divine presence was known and could be accessed.

So Jacob called the name of that place *Bethel* (meaning house of God) ... *previously the name ... had been Luz* (Genesis 28:19). I guess for others it would remain Luz, for there was nothing for passers-by to see – no grand architecture and no impressive religious symbols or rituals. But for Jacob it was now more than special, and he would return to it. This was because he could say: "Surely the LORD is in this place".

And that's the reason why we've referred to Jacob's remarkable

experience – because in this first ever Bible reference to 'the house of God' we're given a defining feature of it which is: 'the LORD is in this place'. Without God's presence being located there in a special way, a place could never be God's dwelling-place. Perhaps that seems obvious but I think it's worth underlining at this stage.

And of course it brings us back to the first vision God gave to the prophet Zechariah. Our plan of study is to relate each of these visions to the building of God's house, for surely that's the relevance of these visions – they were given at that time to be the means of encouragement for the people in their project of rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, which would again be God's house on earth at that time.

But our aim will be to learn the lesson of each vision, because I suggest to you they provide timeless principles which apply to God's house on earth in any age. And that's of relevance to us, because you may remember Peter, when writing to born-again Christians in the first century, went on to talk about the possibility of their *being built up as a spiritual house* (1 Peter 2:5). The apostle Paul had his sights on this too when he spoke of the local New Testament churches of God combining to become the *habitation for God in the Spirit* on this earth (Ephesians 2:20-22). What were the defining features of God's house in

My wrath in the land of the north." (Zechariah 6:1-8).

The four patrols are pictured as coming from between mountains of bronze or copper, obviously symbolic – but of what? It's common to associate bronze or copper in its biblical usage with the idea of judgement. The metal's ability to withstand fierce heat led to it being specified as a covering material for the great copper altar that stood in the courtyard of God's house. There, in the place overlaid with copper, the fire of judgement consumed the sacrifices that were for sin.

Judgement is clearly the theme connected with the bronze mountains here, for the patrol which headed northwards appeased God's wrath in the land of the north, which was Babylonia.

It might seem then this has little to do with God's house as such, as these patrols went out from it to carry out judgements. But isn't that exactly the point Peter makes? Remember he says:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17).

What we're mainly concerned with here is the starting point for that judgement – which is the house of God. God's judgement works outwards from his house. Our concern then is church discipline.

One place where the apostle Paul emphasises our need to obey God's authoritative Word is in Second Thessalonians 3. Notice the number of times he uses words like 'command' and 'obey' as we read from verse 4 to verse 14:

We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command... Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you ... For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread... If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.

This chapter begins by reminding us that the traditional apostolic teaching of the New Testament is nothing short of being the Lord's message. If we love the Lord, we'll keep his

7. Where judgement begins

We now come to the last of Zechariah's visions for builders in God's house. It's a vision heavily accented with judgement. It also links closely with previous topic, in which we were learning the timeless lesson that behaviour within God's house in any age must be regulated by the Word of God.

Wicked behaviour in departing from the teaching of the Word of God must never be tolerated within God's house. We reminded ourselves that in the New Testament it's Peter who specifically refers to the New Testament churches overall as being a 'spiritual house' (1 Peter 2:5), and it's Peter too who writes:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17).

This sets the scene for the eighth and final vision that was given to Zechariah. The prophet was given these visions at a time when the people were resettling in the land of Israel after a period of deportation in Babylon. Actually, they had been taken there as God's judgement upon them – or their fathers at least. Now that a proportion of the people had returned for a fresh start, they needed to learn the lessons of the past. Judgement

might not seem like an encouraging topic, but all these visions were given to encourage the builders in their rebuilding project so that the temple or house for God at Jerusalem might be rebuilt.

Here then is Zechariah's last vision as recorded in God's Word, in chapter 6 of Zechariah the prophet:

Now I lifted up my eyes again and looked, and behold, four chariots were coming forth from between the two mountains; and the mountains were bronze mountains. With the first chariot were red horses, with the second chariot black horses, and with the fourth chariot strong dappled horses. Then I spoke and said to the angel who was speaking with me, "What are these, my lord?" The angel replied to me, "These are the four spirits of heaven, going forth after standing before the Lord of all the earth, with one of which the black horses are going forth to the north country; and the white ones go forth after them, while the dappled ones go forth to the south country. "When the strong ones went out, they were eager to go to patrol the earth. " And He said, "Go, patrol the earth. " So they patrolled the earth. Then He cried out to me and spoke to me saying, "See, those who are going to the land of the north have appeased

New Testament times? The same as they have always been, and first among them is this: that it's the place where the LORD declares that he's come to reside so that men and women can approach and serve him as he instructs them - a 'habitation for God in the Spirit' indeed.

So this had to be the very first reassurance to the builders in Zechariah's day. The vision repeated the point God had made earlier in the first chapter about his willingness to return to them (v.3). That was essential, for as Psalm 127:1 says: *Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it.*

In fact, Zechariah's colleague, the prophet Haggai, emphasized the

same point in his message given at the same time. He told the people:

"I am with you', declares the LORD ... I am with you ... As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst!"

What an encouragement to the builders at that time! And what a reminder to us that God's house in any age is first and foremost 'the place of the Name' (see Deuteronomy 12) meaning a place divinely chosen to be what no other place could be at the same time - the place of the divine presence on earth.

2. Overcoming opposition

Our plan in studying the 8 visions we find early in the Book of the Bible prophet Zechariah is to relate each of the visions to the building of God's house, for surely that's the relevance of these visions – they were given at that time to be the means of encouragement for the people in their project of rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, which would once again be God's house on earth at that time.

The second vision the prophet Zechariah received deals with the opposition the people were facing. The prophet says:

Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, there were four horns. So I said to the angel who was speaking with me, "What are these?" And he answered me, "These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem."

Then the LORD showed me four craftsmen. I said, "What are these coming to do?" And he said, "These are the horns which have scattered Judah so that no man lifts up his head; but these craftsmen have come to terrify them, to throw down the horns of the nations who have lifted up their horns against the land of Judah in order to scatter it." (Zechariah 1:18-21)

Our aim is to learn the lesson of each

AMONG YOURSELVES (v.13).

Wicked behaviour in departing from the teaching of the Word of God must never be tolerated within God's house. Just as the wicked were removed from the land in Zechariah's twin visions; so the wicked man at Corinth was removed from God's New Testament house on earth. In the New Testament it's Peter who specifically refers to the New Testament churches overall as being

a 'spiritual house' (1 Peter 2:5). It's no coincidence that it's he who earlier makes the point that Christians are to be holy even as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16), and later emphasizes the point by saying 'judgement begins at the house of God' (1 Peter 4:17). That's the timeless point of application we've seen illustrated in this twinned vision from Zechariah chapter 5.

seventh vision is so closely related to the sixth that we'll take them together...

Then the angel who was speaking with me went out and said to me, "Lift up now your eyes and see what this is going forth." I said, "What is it?" And he said, "This is the ephah going forth." Again he said, "This is their appearance in all the land (and behold, a lead cover was lifted up); and this is a woman sitting inside the ephah." Then he said, "This is Wickedness!" And he threw her down into the middle of the ephah and cast the lead weight on its opening. Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and there two women were coming out with the wind in their wings; and they had wings like the wings of a stork, and they lifted up the ephah between the earth and the heavens. I said to the angel who was speaking with me, "Where are they taking the ephah?" Then he said to me, "To build a temple for her in the land of Shinar; and when it is prepared, she will be set there on her own pedestal." (Zechariah 5:5-11).

Remember when Zechariah asked: "What is it?" He was told: "This is the ephah going forth ... This is their appearance in all the land." I suggest that links us back to the previous vision of the flying scroll. It's the wicked Jews – those who steal and those who swear – who have the appearance of the ephah. This was the ordinary measure of grain, presumably in some standard

encountered resistance. The writings of Paul, and the historical record of the early churches of God, give us the names of some notorious opponents, names like those of Alexander the coppersmith or Hymeneus and Philetus. The original doctrines of authentic Christianity came under attack early on. The 'standard' teachings which the Lord Jesus had given to his apostles formed the body of doctrine which could very properly be called the spiritual blueprint for the building of God's house on earth. It was a spiritual house, of course, as Peter tells us, when describing the believers as 'living stones'. But they were 'living stones' arranged carefully according to God's pattern. Every building project needs its blueprint or pattern. Certainly, in the Old Testament both the Tabernacle and the Temple at Jerusalem had a pattern which originated in the mind of God. These structures were not of human design or ingenuity. The Bible emphasizes the fact that Moses built to the God-given pattern, and commends him for doing so.

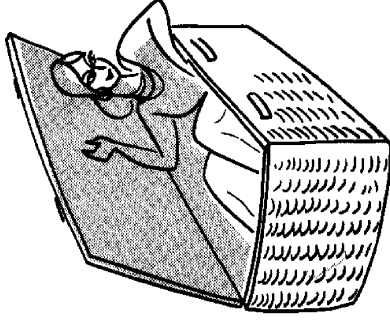
In this so-called Church Age the same principle applies. The pattern is specified by the commands of the apostles found in the New Testament writings. When they are obeyed fully and put into practice, God's house takes shape, comprising every Christian who faithfully – like Moses – follows the God-given pattern for Christian service laid down in the New Testament. This, as we've said,

was what was known as the apostles' teaching or simply referred to as 'the Faith' - being the Faith, not just faith. It was the body of doctrine, the things people were to believe. So coming back to the matter of overcoming opposition, which is the feature of Zechariah's second vision, we find Jude saying:

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. (Jude 1:3)

You notice the implied opposition? The Faith, the pattern of instructions contained in the commands of the Lord Jesus through his apostles was something which had to be contended for. They were under attack by false teachers and false teaching.

Perhaps that's a fairly blatant form of opposition. But there's another source of resistance to God's truth which is within our own selves – or should I say it's our former selves, sometimes referred to in Bible versions as the 'old man' or 'old self'. To overcome this source of opposition, the apostle Paul writes in Romans 12, *Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that*



container of the appropriate volume. As the grain is collected together into a measure in a basket so the wicked were to be gathered out of the land. And symbolically the wings of these great migratory birds would migrate them to Babylon.

Many interesting things flow from this, linking in with New Testament prophecy from the book of the Revelation, and telling how, in the end-time scenario, wickedness will again come to its zenith in a resurgent city of Babylon – upon which the judgement of God will fall. But staying with our chosen theme for this study – in which we're trying to identify general principles or conditions relating to God's house on earth in any age when people are attempting to build for God, let's refresh our memory from First Corinthians chapter 5 where the expulsion of an immoral brother from the Church of God at Corinth is described. Paul says in the very last verse of chapter 5:

... REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM

which is good and acceptable and perfect. (vv.1,2)

Self-will and worldliness are definite enemies of the Faith. They hinder its expression in our lives. Dying to our former self, and choosing God's will in preference to our own, is the way we can, by God's help, overcome this subtle foe through becoming living sacrifices. Paul's just mentioned 'transformation' - what he has in mind is nothing less than a total change from the inside out, like a caterpillar to butterfly type change. The kind of change that ends up with us agreeing that God's will - and not our own will - is the thing that's good for us, and is in fact all we need.

That has the effect of drawing our attention away from ourselves and towards the needs of others. For Paul continues:

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts ... let love be without hypocrisy ... practicing hospitality ... (Romans 12:4-6)

The result is we end up serving God and one another - according to our giftedness - and in the New Testament setting that takes us into the arena of local, biblical churches of God forming God's house. In its Old Testament counterpart there was an

altar for animal sacrifices connected with the house of God or Tabernacle in Moses' day. Multitudes of animals lost their lives on Jewish altars, but from New Testament times it's living sacrifices that God is looking for in his house.

When the living stones of which God's house is now built present themselves to God as living sacrifices that's the way to overcome the opposition which stems from the will of our former self and the worldliness which so often accompanies it. It's by living under the shadow of the cross day by day - by being a living sacrifice - by re-orienting ourselves to the will of God. Not just knowing the will of God in terms of everyday guidance issues, but his will concerning serving him with our gifts among his gathered people. That's what it means to live sacrificially - from the world, and for others - in the very place of sacrifice and worship (see Deuteronomy 12).

So, whether it's opposition from others who teach differently to the original apostolic teaching or whether it's a resistance that expresses itself through our own self-will, or whether it's worldly opinions trying to squeeze us into the world's mould, whichever it is - it's certainly a recurring feature of building for God that there's opposition to be faced, and by God's help, to be overcome.

sinners against the second table of the ten commandments which deals with sins people commit against each other; whereas false swearing was a sin primarily against God which is the category dealt with in the first table of the Law. So both aspects are included: things honourable in the sight of God and men. Swearing in the name of the LORD for deceit might refer to perjury in the broadest sense of the word, or to any abuse of the name of God for false, deceitful swearing.

I think we can agree there's a definite link between the scroll Zechariah sees and the Word of God as it was given through Moses. Nowadays God's Word, the Bible, is lightly regarded by many people. But as the flying scroll graphically demonstrated then, God wanted the people to have a high view of his Word! - and he still does! We read in the Psalms (138:2), after all, that he has exalted his Word and his Name above all things.

In the days when God's house is no longer a physical structure, but is now a spiritual house, God's standard, of course, is still as high. The apostle Paul, in fact, brings the same two points about not stealing and not speaking wrongly into focus when writing to some of those within God's house in the church of God at Ephesus (in Chapter 4:28,29):

Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in

order that he may have something to share with him who has need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.

But let's go back now to what Zechariah saw: the huge flying scroll. Remember the size? Twenty cubits by ten. Does that ring any bells? Seem familiar? Well, it's the exact size of the first compartment - or holy place - of the tabernacle, God's house on earth in the days of Moses. And thirty feet by fifteen - which is what this amounts to - are also the dimensions of the temple porch in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:3). Interesting, because that was where the law was usually read.

Having picked up on those two links: first to the Word of God, and then to the house of God, I simply want to make the point that the standards of God's house are the standards of God's Word. Behaviour within God's house in any age must be regulated by the Word of God. With the physical structures we've referred to such as the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple, it was God's Word in terms of the Law of Moses; in the spiritual house from New Testament times it's the teaching of the apostles found written as New Testament commands.

Before we come to an example of those commands, let's also take the next vision Zechariah saw, for the

6. Where God's Word rules

I think it was in Belgium where I first noticed them. Huge flying adverts. They were towed behind small aircraft over densely populated areas. You'll understand why that comes to mind as we come now to vision number six from Zechariah:

Then I lifted up my eyes again and looked, and behold, there was a flying scroll. And he said to me, "What do you see?" And I answered, "I see a flying scroll; its length is twenty cubits and its width ten cubits." Then he said to me, "This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land; surely everyone who steals will be purged away according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears will be purged away according to the writing on the other side. "I will make it go forth," declares the LORD of hosts, "and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name; and it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones." (Zechariah 5:1-4)

A flying scroll, more like a flying billboard! Did you get the size? Something like thirty feet by fifteen or ten metres by five. Just as in the case of the advertisers, I think it's clear that God wanted his people to get the message all right.

But as well as being big, there was another eye-catching feature: it was

written on both sides. Now does that trigger any memories? A flashback to the time of Moses and the giving of the Law perhaps? Here's what Exodus 32:15,16 says:

... Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the other. The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets. So it's as if this flying scroll is meant to remind us of the stone tablets written with the Word of God in terms of the ten commandments, written on one side and the other (Exodus 32:15).

There's another connection between the scroll in this vision and the stone tables containing the ten commandments. For the curse pronounced judgement on those who swore falsely in the LORD's name and against thieves who stole – that is, it's related directly to the third and eighth of the ten commandments respectively. Remember those two commands stated:

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain," and "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:7, 15).

In Zechariah's vision it seems as if thieves are mentioned specifically as

3. Separation

So we now come to the third of Zechariah's visions from the time the Jews were rebuilding the temple of God at Jerusalem after their period of captivity in Babylon. We're trying to identify the specific point of encouragement in each of these visions – encouragement for them, but also for us. So let's take the third vision Zechariah saw:

Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a man with a measuring line in his hand. So I said, "Where are you going?" And he said to me, "To measure Jerusalem, to see how wide it is and how long it is." And behold, the angel who was speaking with me was going out, and another angel was coming out to meet him, and said to him, "Run, speak to that young man, saying, 'Jerusalem will be inhabited without walls because of the multitude of men and cattle within it. For I, declares the LORD, will be a wall of fire around her, and I will be the glory in her midst.'" (Zechariah 2:2-5)

At the beginning of the vision the young man was measuring the city of Jerusalem. The implication was that the city was in the future going to become a large, expansive city teeming with people, so much so that it would spill over its boundaries and not be able to be contained

within walls. But there was the reassurance that there would be no security risk because the Lord himself would be a wall of fire around it. The city would still need a wall of some kind to make a line of separation between the inside and the outside, and so to keep out everything that belonged outside.

In terms of the immediate rebuilding work which was to hand, Nehemiah was soon to come and rebuild the Jerusalem city's defensive wall, enclosing, of course, the temple as the house of God.

This is the point of principle I want to suggest this vision raises – that the proper functioning of God's house in any age – and irrespective of its size – requires a clear line of demarcation so we can be clear as to what's within God's house or kingdom, and what's outside of it. In terms of God's spiritual house in the New Testament, the apostle Paul had to command the local church of God at Corinth to 'put away' from itself an immoral brother (1 Corinthians 5:13). He was expelled to the outside place, as no longer remaining in God's house – still in the Body of Christ, of course, for that comprises all believers – but removed from the fellowship and service of the house of God which found its local expression in the Church of God at Corinth.

The clear need to have a line - or wall - of separation between what's inside and what's outside of God's house is also demonstrated in Paul's second letter to Timothy. Let's begin our review of what's there with a point of general principle from Paul's argument:

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 2:20,21)

Vessels are separated out here as to whether they are in the category of being honourable or that of being dishonourable. And from what we read around these verses, we find Timothy's going to have to deal with - going to have to separate out - honourable and dishonourable workers in God's spiritual house at that time.

Here's how this difference in principle was applied in practice. Paul says:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth ... [and he goes on to say] Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place ... upset the faith of some.

But Timothy's judgement as to who was approved and who was ashamed could never be a subjective or arbitrary one. The apostle set out for Timothy the basis for discriminating when he said:

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness."

The kind of seal that existed in Bible times was a device such as a signet ring or cylinder, engraved with the owner's name or a design, kept around the neck on a cord or on the finger as a ring ... it featured a raised or recessed signature to leave its mark when impressed on wax or clay ... a seal usually served to certify a signature or authenticate a letter (Nelson's dictionary).

So a seal was the mark of genuineness. In this case we're talking about God's seal of approval. It's God himself who makes the approved and honourable to be distinguished from the dishonourable and ashamed.

Remember what we read:

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness."

What is the foundation which has the double seal? The form of wording

help we've asked for.

Well, Zechariah knew here what it was like to be kept waiting. Early on in the vision, when his attention was drawn to the olive trees on either side, he asked the question 'what are these?' The immediate answer he received was not specifically about the olive trees as such however, but instead gave the prophet - and us - the key to interpreting the whole vision. Which we say again, was to make abundantly clear that in any work for God it's the Spirit of God who produces the results. We should labour as if it all depended on us, but we should never believe for a minute that it really does: it's not by human might or power, but by the Holy Spirit's working that God's work is done. That's why in this vision there's no representation of anyone pressing the olives, but only of channels through which the oil flows to give the light of witness. It's like the old hymn says: 'Channels only, blessed Master, but with all Thy wondrous power flowing through us, Thou canst use us, every day and every hour.'

Near the end of the vision Zechariah again enquires about the two olive trees, and in his eagerness even repeats the question. Finally, the long-awaited answer is given. But not before the angel has expressed surprise that the prophet didn't know. At last the build-up is over and the answer comes:

"These are the two anointed ones

who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth." (v.14).

Perhaps it seems like an anticlimax! After all, that we might have wished the answer was plainer to understand! However we venture to suggest that since this chapter has featured the work of Zerubbabel, and the previous chapter focused on the office of Joshua, these two are likely the ones being referred to in the first instance. Zerubbabel belonged to the line of the kings, and Joshua was high priest. Since both kings and priests were anointed, then maybe these two named individuals - individuals intimately involved with the work of rebuilding - are the most likely candidates for being the 'two anointed ones.' Perhaps the way is already being prepared for the recognition of the Messiah in a later chapter, one who will combine both offices and sit as priest on his throne.

Let's emphasize the timeless lesson of this vision: that the house of God on earth is designed to be a witness to the truth of God. To that end it functions by the Spirit of God with God-given light. In the book of Revelation, the witness of local churches of God (chs. 2 & 3, as well as the witness of individual prophets (ch.11), is described in terms of them being lampstands. The overall significance of the use of the term 'lampstand' in our Bibles seems to be the idea of Spirit-given light for witness - for bearing testimony before men and women.

"No, my lord." Then he said, "These are the two anointed ones who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth." (Zechariah 4:1-14)

Remember the historical background to this – and the other visions? The Israelites have returned from captivity in Babylon – returned to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple which the Babylonian king had destroyed. The work was slow, there was opposition, and the emerging new temple seemed but a pale reflection of past glories. This was the cue for Zechariah's fifth vision which we've just read.

The most important feature of his vision was the encouragement it gave that the work in hand would be successfully completed through the working of the Spirit of God. Zerubbabel, the governor, had not only begun the work, he was going to finish it as well. Just as the foundation stone had been laid by his hands, so also would the stone at the head of the corner which crowned the work. The hands of the builders had been weakened by discouragement. The older folks with long memories could remember the magnificence of the Temple Solomon had built, the one the Babylonians destroyed. The current rebuilding project seemed small and insignificant by comparison. The expression 'the day of small things' seemed to have been a disparaging term applied to the current efforts by those who longed after past glories. But while they

looked back, God was looking forward. He speaks of how his eye anticipated Zerubbabel's final checks using a plumb line – the plumb-line showing the building as being true to God's own pattern. That was a source of gladness for God and he said so – how encouraging that must have been for the disheartened workers! It's worth pausing to apply that encouragement to any discouraging situation we may be experiencing in church life. Our efforts can seem so feeble, and results may be small, but when once we have the assurance of the Spirit's working we can take heart from God's different perspective as we build to God's own pattern. So the promise was that the difficulties would dissolve away, and with an ascription of blessing, the work would be finished.

Encouragement through a dependence on the Spirit's working was obviously the main point of the vision, but a really striking feature of it is the way the prophet Zechariah was kept waiting in suspense, waiting for the answer to his question – the question he'd asked about the two olive trees. I'm sure we can relate to the business of being kept waiting. We may often read something in the Bible the meaning of which is not very clear to us, so we pray asking for help to understand it so we might apply it correctly to our lives. But it seems as if it's some time later before – by some means or other – we get the

indicates a clear parallel with a dramatic Old Testament story where Korah and his company rebelled against Moses. Responding to the rebellion we read about in Numbers chapter 16:

Moses ... spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His" ... Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the congregation, saying, 'Get back from around the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.'" Then Moses arose and went to Dathan and Abiram, with the elders of Israel following him, and he spoke to the congregation, saying, "**Depart now from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be swept away in all their sin.**" (Numbers 16:4,5,23-6)

The match in both Old and New Testaments between those whom the Lord knows - and they being the ones who must abstain from wickedness - is beyond coincidence. Some commentators on our Timothy scripture have thought that this matter of the Lord knowing those who are his refers to the Lord knowing the difference between the saved and the unsaved, but I suggest that's not where the whole context of Second Timothy chapter two leads us to. Think about it, the context in this chapter is all about conduct in the house of God as regulated by the Word of God; it's

about what meets with God's approval and what doesn't.

Scanning the chapter, I suggest we're given clear examples of 'those who are his'. They are the 'faithful men' to whom Timothy was to entrust the good deposit of truth; they were also pictured in the model soldier, athlete, and farmer; we glimpse them again as the 'approved workmen' faithfully handling the word of God; and as those corresponding to 'vessels of honour' prepared for every good work; and finally not forgetting the mention near the end of the chapter of the 'Lord's bond-servants'.

Set over against these were 'those who were in opposition' - people like Hymenaeus and Philetus: those, you remember, who had erred concerning the truth. That's the key here: the two camps are distinguished by how they handle the truth of God.

But if the first seal is 'those who are his', the second seal is those who 'abstain from wickedness'. Once again failure to abstain from wickedness characterizes those throughout this chapter who 'wrangle about words'; who engage in 'worldly and empty chatter ... ungodliness'; who go 'astray from the truth... [and] upset the faith of some'; who fail to 'flee from youthful lusts'; and who participate in 'foolish and ignorant speculations ... quarrels'.

Timothy is told that those bearing God's approval – on the basis of their faithful adherence to the truth of God's Word - have to 'cleanse

themselves' (2 Timothy 2:21) from all who are dishonourable. This is what we mean by God's house having a wall of separation around it. Visible separation from error is required of workers who exhibit God's invisible seal of approval, and that's our principle for today.

For Zechariah's third vision was of the city of Jerusalem becoming very large, but the city still needed a wall of some

kind to make a line of separation between the inside and the outside, and so to keep out everything that belonged outside. So the proper functioning of God's house in any age - and irrespective of its size - requires a clear line of demarcation making clear what's within God's house or kingdom, and what's outside of it.

5. A Witness to men

Are you engaged in some difficult work for the Lord? Or maybe you regard your work as just a small work, but a work made difficult nonetheless by the attitudes of others who are involved? I remember a time when I was wrestling with church difficulties. I tumbled out of bed one morning into prayer and then from prayer to my Bible reading. My planned reading for the day was Zechariah chapter 4, our current study. It was a real encouragement to me, I tell you, to read about a man awakened from sleep to catch a vision of a golden lampstand, the New Testament symbol for a church of God (Rev. 2&3). Sometimes we might be tempted to see the local church where we're working as full of problems, making the work of building there for God ever so difficult, but then God gives us a different view: he shows us what it means to him. But enough, let's read more from Zechariah the prophet:

Then the angel who was speaking with me returned and roused me, as a man who is awakened from his sleep. He said to me, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold with its bowl on the top of it, and its seven lamps on it with seven spouts belonging to each of the lamps which are on the top of it; also two olive trees by it,

one on the right side of the bowl and the other on its left side." Then I said to the angel who was speaking with me saying, "What are these, my lord?" So the angel who was speaking with me answered and said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said, "No, my lord." Then he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts. 'What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become a plain; and he will bring forth the top stone with shouts of "Grace, grace to it!"'"" Also the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands will finish it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. "For who has despised the day of small things? But these seven will be glad when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel--these are the eyes of the LORD which range to and fro throughout the earth." Then I said to him, "What are these two olive trees on the right of the lampstand and on its left?" And I answered the second time and said to him, "What are the two olive branches which are beside the two golden pipes, which empty the golden oil from themselves?" So he answered me, saying, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said,

and foretold then that access would be less restrictive than in a bygone day.

Jesus, the Messiah, is given the title of the Branch here, and I think he's the one seen in the stone too – as the stone whom the builders rejected but made by God the chief cornerstone in God's spiritual house today. Peter, who writes about this spiritual house in the time of the New Testament Churches of God, also identifies Jesus as the stone laid by God in the heavenly Zion above. And, what's more, he – like Zechariah – tells us that our approach to God in worship in the heavenly sanctuary in Zion is one of the main characteristic features of God's spiritual house on earth in this age we're living in. He tells us it's by coming to Christ as the Living Stone that we're built up as living stones to be God's house. So this appreciation of the promise of free access among the innumerable hosts of angels is certainly another defining feature of God's house which we can take away from this vision – as we're trying to look for lessons relevant to God's house at all times from this series of visions that were once given to encourage the returned exiles from Babylon to get on with the temple rebuild at Jerusalem.

If you want to pursue this amazing biblical revelation of how the people of God who form his house on earth

actually access a sanctuary or holy place in heaven during their times of collective worship I really recommend you get into Hebrews chapter 12 where from verse 22 it says:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels ... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Chapter 10 confirms this heavenly dimension of Godward service within God's house when it says:

... we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, ... through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near... (Hebrews 10:19-22).

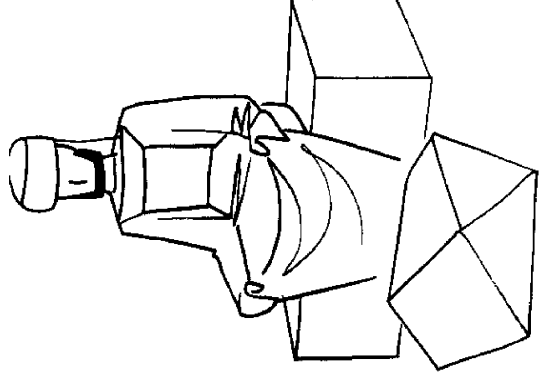
What a revelation! And what an invitation! One, I think, that's entirely consistent with Zechariah's promised 'free access'. Notice the mention in Hebrews ten of Christ's 'flesh' and 'blood' as it talks about our entrance inside the veil into heaven's sanctuary. It shows, does it not, that this free access for the people of God connects with the weekly Remembrance of the Lord Jesus held in biblical Churches of God, where, in the bread and wine symbols, we recall his flesh and blood as our means of access.

4. Service Godward

The service of God is first and foremost a service that's directed Godwards. And the service or worship of God is the defining feature of God's house that's brought to our attention in this, the fourth of Zechariah's visions:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. The LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. He spoke and said to those who were standing before him, saying, "Remove the filthy garments from him." Again he said to him, "See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes." Then I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while the angel of the LORD was standing by. And the angel of the LORD admonished Joshua, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'If you will walk in My ways and if you will perform My service, then you will also govern My house and also have charge of My courts, and I will grant you free access among these who

are standing here. Now listen, Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who are sitting in front of you - indeed they are men who are a symbol, for behold, I am going to bring in My servant the Branch. For behold, the stone that I have set before Joshua; on one stone are seven eyes. Behold, I will engrave an inscription on it,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. 'In that day,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'every one of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and under his fig tree.'" (Zechariah 3:1-10)



The scene opens in dramatic fashion. The high priest isn't in the temple courts, but in something more reminiscent of law courts. Joshua the high priest is described by the Lord as 'a brand plucked from the fire'. So in this case the high priest isn't a picture of the Lord Jesus, as he often is. But instead it seems like Israel as a priestly nation, as a kingdom of priests, is being represented by the high priest in this vision, or at least at this part of it. The Israelites had just returned from captivity in Babylon. God had plucked them from the fire – brought them out of punishment in Babylon – and was now going to show mercy towards them and re-establish the service of God at Jerusalem in the temple that was under reconstruction.

When Satan is pictured as Joshua's accuser, we're reminded of how he's described in the book of Revelation as 'the accuser of the brethren' (Rev.12:10). His hostility is directed against the people of God in every age. He's well named as being our Adversary. But our God is able to shut the lion's mouth! For, as the letter to the Romans asks: 'Who can lay anything to the charge of God's elect?' (Romans 8:33). God had dealt with his priestly people in the fire of the Babylonian captivity, so who was Satan to continue accusing them? There's no grounds for despair!

The words of the hymn come to mind: When Satan tempts me to despair; Upward I look and see Him there Who made an end of all my sin.

It's the Lord Jesus who's being viewed there as our defender, of course.

So the Lord ordered Joshua's filthy clothes to be replaced by festal robes. But before he's clothed with priestly clothes again, the prophet utters a passionate prayer: 'let them put a clean turban on his head!' As I think of Zechariah calling out in the midst of this vision, we get the sense of how real it was to him. I'm reminded of those who call out in their sleep when their dreams are vivid. And I really find it most interesting that Zechariah steps inside the vision – as it were – with his concern focused on the high priest's headgear, the mitre or turban.

But why should Zechariah be so focused on the turban – why was he so keen to be reassured the mitre wouldn't be omitted? Some people just think it was that he wanted complete reassurance of the restoration of the priestly nation at that time, and so he naturally looked to the item of clothing that completed the high priest's wardrobe. Maybe that was a part of it, but I think there's more to it. There's something connected with the turban which we can read about in the book of Exodus where Moses was commanded:

"You shall also make a plate of pure gold and shall engrave on it, like the engravings of a seal, 'Holy to the LORD.' You shall fasten it on a blue cord, and it shall be on the turban; it

shall be at the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall take away the iniquity of the holy things which the sons of Israel consecrate, with regard to all their holy gifts; and it shall always be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD. (Ex.28:36-38)

I believe that's why this matter of the turban or mitre was so important to Zechariah, and was on his mind. He knew only too well the failings of his people. How could they ever function in the presence of God, how could they approach to the holy God of heaven in his earthly residence if there was any possibility that the inevitable imperfections of their offerings might render them less than acceptable before God? How thankful we, too, are that we have in our Lord Jesus a high priest who, Hebrews 2 says:

... had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (Heb 2:17, 18).

Again the hymn-writer says of our Lord Jesus, the ultimate high priest: For us He wears the mitre; Where holiness shines bright.

For us His robes are whiter

than heaven's unsullied light. How often we too, like Zechariah, need to make that our appeal! But we must pass on to other interesting things in this vision. Remember the Lord's words to Joshua in the vision?

And the angel of the LORD admonished Joshua, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'If you will walk in My ways and if you will perform My service, then you will also govern My house and also have charge of My courts, and I will grant you free access among these who are standing here'" (Zech.3:6,7).

It's that last promise particularly that grabbed me. Joshua's friends were sitting before him, so I think these standing ones were angels. I wonder then if this is a reminder that God's house on earth is the gate of heaven, as in its first revelation to Jacob in Genesis chapter 28 in terms of a ladder set up on the earth with angels ascending and descending upon it? The house of God on earth with its sanctuary is the place where the people of God have access in a special way to the immediate presence of God. But the promise to Joshua seems to carry us forward in time – as confirmed by later parts of the vision. Joshua and his friends sitting before him are symbolic. The vision isn't just about the restoration of the service of God's house in the sixth century BC, but symbolises the good times which were to come for God's house after Christ's Advent,