

George Whitefield

Sermon 50

Christians, Temples of the living God

2 Corinthians 6:16, "You are the Temple of the living God."

Isaiah, speaking of the glory of gospel days, said, "Men have not heard nor perceived by the ear, neither has the eye seen, O God, besides you, what he has prepared for him that waits for him." Chap. 64:4. Could a world lying in the wicked one, be really convinced of this, they would need no other motive to induce them to renounce themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus Christ. And had believers this truth always deeply impressed upon their souls, they could not but abstain from every evil, be continually aspiring after every good; and in a word, use all diligence to walk worthy of Him who has called them to his kingdom and glory. If I mistake not, that is the end purposed by the apostle Paul, in the words of the text, "You are the temple of the living God." Words originally directed to the church of Corinth, but which equally belong to us, and to our children, and to as many as the Lord our God shall call. To give you the true meaning of, and then practically to improve them, shall be my endeavor in the following discourse.

FIRST, I shall endeavor to give you the meaning of these words, "You are the temple of the living God." The expression undoubtedly is metaphorical, or figurative: but under the metaphor, something real, and of infinite importance, is to be understood. And there seems to be a manifest allusion, not only to what we call temples or churches in general, but to the Jewish temple in particular. I trust, that but few, if any here, need be informed, that the preparations for this edifice were exceedingly grand, that it was modeled and built by a divine order, and when completed was separated from common uses, and dedicated to the service of the incomprehensible Jehovah, with the utmost solemnity.

It is thus that Christians are "the temple of the living God," of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; they who once held a consultation to create, are all equally concerned in making preparations for, and effectually bringing about the redemption of man. The Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies all the elect people of God. Being loved from eternity, they are effectually called in time, they are chosen out of the world, and not only by an external formal dedication at baptism, or at the Lord's supper, but by a free, voluntary, unconstrained oblation, they devote themselves, spirit, soul, and body, to the entire service of Him, who has loved and given himself for them.

This is true and undefiled religion before God our heavenly Father: This is the real Christian's reasonable service, or, as some think the word imports, this is the service

required of us in the word of God. It implies no less than a total renunciation of the world; in short, turns the Christian's whole life into one continued sacrifice of love to God; so that, "whether he eats or drinks, he does all to his glory." Not that I would hereby insinuate, that to be Christians, or to keep to the words of our text, in order to be temples of the living God, we must become hermits, or shut ourselves up in nunneries or cloisters; this be far from me! No. The religion, which this Bible in my hand prescribes, is a social religion, a religion equally practicable by high and low, rich and poor, and which absolutely requires a due discharge of all relative duties, in whatsoever state of life God shall be pleased to place and continue us.

That some, in all ages of the church, have literally separated themselves from the world, and from a sincere desire to save their souls, and attain higher degrees of Christian perfection, have wholly devoted themselves to solitude and retirement, is what I make no doubt of. But then such a zeal is in no wise according to knowledge; for private Christians, as well as ministers, are said to be "the salt of the earth, and the lights of the world," and are commanded to "let their light shine before men." But how can this be done, if we shut ourselves up, and thereby entirely exclude ourselves from all manner of conversation with the world? Or supposing we could take the wings of the morning, and fly into the most distant and desolate parts of the earth, what would this avail us, unless we could agree with a wicked heart and wicked tempter not to pursue and molest us there?

So far should we be from thus getting ease and comfort, that I believe we should on the contrary soon find by our experience the truth of what a hermit himself once told me, that a tree which stands by itself, is most exposed and liable to the strongest blasts. When our Savior was to be tempted by the devil, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. How contrary this to their practice, who go into a wilderness to avoid temptation! Surely such are unmindful of the petition put up for us by our blessed Lord, "Father, I pray not that you would take them out of the world, but that you would keep them from the evil." This then is to be a Christian indeed; to be in the world, and yet not of it; to have our hands, according to our respective stations in life, employed on earth, and our hearts at the same time fixed on things above. Then, indeed, are we "temples of the living God," when with a humble boldness, we can say with a great and good soldier of Jesus Christ, we are the same in the parlor, as we are in the closet; and can at night throw off our cares, as we throw off our clothes; and being at peace with the world, ourselves, and God, are indifferent whether we sleep or die.

Farther, the Jewish temple was a house of prayer. "My house (says the Great God) shall be called a house of prayer:" and implies that the hearts of true believers are the seats of prayer. For this end was it built, and adorned with such furniture. Solomon, in that admirable prayer which he put up to God at the dedication of the temple, says, "Hearken therefore unto the supplication of your servant, and of the people Israel, which they shall make towards this place." And hence I suppose it was that Daniel, that man greatly

beloved, in the time of captivity, "prayed as aforetime three times a day with his face towards the temple." And what was said of the first, our Lord applies to the second temple, "My house shall be called a house of prayer." On this account also, true believers may be stilled, "the temple of the living God." For being wholly devoted and dedicated to God, even a God in Christ, their heart becomes the seats of prayer, from whence, as to many living altars, a perpetual sacrifice of prayer and praise (like unto, tho' infinitely superior to the perpetual oblation under the Mosaic dispensation) is continually ascending, and offered up, to the Father of Mercies, the God of all Consolations. Such, and such only, who thus worship God in the temple of their hearts, can truly be said to be made priests unto God, or be stilled a royal priesthood; such, and such only, can truly be stilled, "the temple of the living God," because such only pray to him, as one expresses it, in the temple of their hearts, and consequently worship him in spirit and in truth.

Let no one say that such a devotion is impracticable, or at least only practicable by a few, and those such who have nothing to do with the common affairs of life; for this is the common duty and privilege of all true Christians. "To pray without ceasing," and "to rejoice in the Lord always," are precepts equally obligatory on all that name the name of Christ. And though it must be owned, that it is hard for persons that are immersed in the world, to serve the Lord without distraction; and though we must confess, that the lamp of devotion, even in the best of saints, sometimes burns too dimly, yet those who are the temple of the living God, find prayer to be their very element: And when those who make this objection, once come to love prayer, as some unhappy men love swearing, they will find no more difficulty in praying to, and praising God always, than these unhappy creatures do in cursing and swearing always. What has been advanced, is far from being a state peculiar to persons wholly retired from the world.

My brethren, the love of God is all in all. When once possessed of this, as we certainly must be, if you are "the temple of the loving God," meditation, prayer, praise, and other spiritual exercises, become habitual and delightful. When once touched with this divine magnet, for ever after the soul feels a divine attraction, and continually turns to its center, God; and if diverted therefrom, by any sudden or violent temptation, yet when that obstruction is removed, like as a needle touched by a lodestone when your finger is taken away, turns to its rest, its center, its God, its All, again.

The Jewish temple was also a place where the Great Jehovah was pleased in a more immediate manner to reside. Hence, he is said to put and record his name there, and to sit or dwell between the cherubims; and when Solomon first dedicated it, we are told, "the house was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord had filled the house." And wherefore all this amazing manifestation of the Divine Glory? Even for this, O man, to show you how the High and Lofty One that inhabits eternity, would make believers hearts his living temple, and dwell and make his abode in all those that tremble at his word.

To this, the apostle more particularly alludes in the words immediately following our text; for having called the Corinthians "the temple of the living God," he adds, "as God has said, I will dwell in them, and I will walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Strange and strong expressions these! But strange and strong as they are, must be experienced by all who are indeed "the temple of the loving God." For they are said, to be "chosen to be a holy habitation through the Spirit; to dwell in God and God in them; to have the witness in themselves, and to have God's Spirit witnessing with their spirits that they are the children of God." Which expressions import no more or less, than that prayer of our Lord which he put up for his church and people a little before his bitter passion, "That they may be one, even as we are one, I in them, and you in me, that they may be made perfect in one:" This glorious passage our church adopts in her excellent communion office, and is so far from thinking that this was only the privilege of apostles, that she asserts in the strongest terms, that it is the privilege of every worthy communicant. For then (says she) if we receive the sacrament worthily, we are one with Christ, and Christ is one with us; we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us. And what is it, but that inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which we pray for in the beginning of that office, and that fellowship of the Holy Spirit, which the minister, in the conclusion of every day's public prayer, entreats the Lord to be with us all evermore.

Brethren, the time would fail me to mention all the scriptures, and the various branches of our liturgy, articles, and homilies, that speak of this inestimable blessing, the indwelling of the blessed Spirit, whereby we do indeed become, "the temples of the living God." If you have eyes that see, or ears that hear, you may view it almost in every page of the lively oracles, and every part of those offices, which some of you daily use, and hear read to you, in the public worship of Almighty God. In asserting therefore this doctrine, we do not vent the whimsies of a disordered brain, and heated imagination; neither do we broach any new doctrines, or set up the peculiar opinions of any particular sect or denomination of Christians whatsoever; but we speak the words of truth and soberness, we show you the right and good old way, even that, in which the articles of all the reformed churches, and all sincere Christians of all parties, however differing in other respects, do universally agree. We are now insisting upon a point, which may properly be termed the Christian shibboleth, something which is the grand criterion of our most holy religion; and on account of which, the holy Ignatius, one of the first fathers of the church, was used to stile himself a bearer of God, and the people to whom he wrote, bearers of God: For this, as it is recorded of him, he was arraigned before Trajan, who imperiously said, Where is this man, that says, he carries God about with him. With an humble boldness he answered, I am he, and then quoted the passage in the text, "You are the temple of the living God; as God has said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Upon this, to cure him of his enthusiast, he was condemned to be devoured by lions.

Blessed be God! We are not in danger of being called before such persecuting Trajans now: under our present mild and happy administration, the scourge of the tongue is all

that they can legally lash us with. But if permitted to go farther, we need not be ashamed of witnessing this good confession. Suffering grace will be given for suffering times; and if, like Ignatius, we are bearers of God, we also shall be enabled to say with him, when led to the devouring lions, Now I begin to be a disciple of Christ.

But it is time for me,

SECONDLY, To make some practical improvement of what has been delivered. You have heard in what sense it is that real Christians are "the temple of the living God." Shall I ask, Believe you these things? I know and am persuaded that some of you do indeed believe them, not because I have told you, but because you yourselves have experienced the same.

I congratulate you from my inmost soul. O that your hearts may be in tune this day to "magnify the Lord," and your spirits prepared to "rejoice in God your Savior." Like the Virgin Mary, you are highly favored, and from henceforth all the generations of God's people shall call you blessed. You can call Christ, Lord, by the Holy Spirit, and thereby have an internal, as well as external evidence of the divinity, both of his person, and of his holy word. You can now prove that despised book, emphatically called The Scriptures, does contain the perfect and acceptable will of God. You have found the second Adam to be a quickening spirit; He has raised you from death to life. And being thus taught, and born of God, however unlearned in other respects, you can say, "Is not this the Christ?" O ineffable blessing! Inconceivable privilege! God's spirit witnesses with your spirits, that you are the children of God. When you think of this, are you not ready to cry out with the beloved disciple, "What manner of love is this, that we should be called the children of God!" I believe that holy man was in an ecstasy when he wrote these words; and tho' he has been in heaven so long, yet his ecstatic surprise is but now beginning, and will be but as beginning through the ages of eternity. Thus shall it be with all you likewise, whom the high and lofty One, that inhabits eternity, has made his living temples. For He has sealed you to the day of redemption, and has given you the earnest of your future inheritance. His eyes and heart shall therefore be upon you continually: and in spite of all opposition from men or devils, the top-stone of this spiritual building shall be brought forth, and you shall shout Grace, grace unto it: your bodies shall be fashioned like unto the Redeemer's glorious body, and your souls, in which (O infinite condescension!) He now delights to dwell, shall be filled with all the fullness of God. You shall then go no more out; you shall then no more need the light of the sun or the light of the moon, for the Lord himself will be your temple, and the Lamb in the midst thereof shall be your glory. Dearly beloved in the Lord, what say you to these things? Do not your hearts burn within you while thinking of these deep, but glorious truths of God. While I am musing, and speaking of them, methinks a fire kindles even in this cold, icy heart of mine: O what shall we render unto the Lord for all these mercies? Surely He has done great things for us: How great is his goodness, and his bounty! O the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of the love of God! Surely it passes knowledge. O for

humility! And a soul-abasing, God-exalting sense of these things! When the blessed virgin went into the hill country, to pay a visit to her cousin Elizabeth, amazed at such a favor, she cried out, "Whence is it that the mother of my Lord vouchsafes to come to me?" And when the great Jehovah filled the temple with his glory, out of the abundance of his heart, king Solomon burst forth into this pathetic exclamation, "But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth?" With how much greater astonishment ought we to say, And will the Lord himself in very deed come to us? Will the high and lofty One that inhabits eternity, dwell in, and make our earthly hearts his living temples? My brethren, whence is this? From any fitness in us foreseen? No, I know you disclaim such an unbecoming thought. Was it then from the improvement of our own free-will? No, I am persuaded you will not thus debase the riches of God's free grace. Are you not all ready to say, Not unto us, not unto us, but unto your free, your unmerited, your sovereign, distinguishing love and mercy, O Lord, be all the glory. It is this, and this alone, has made the difference between us and others. We have nothing but what is freely given us from above: if we love God, it is because God first loved us. Let us look then unto the rock from whence we have been hewn, and the hole of the pit from whence we have been digged. And if there be any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the spirit, if any bowels and mercies, let us study and strive to walk as becomes those who are made the temples of the living God, or, as the apostle elsewhere expresses himself, "a holy temple unto the Lord." What manner of persons ought such to be in all holy conversation and godliness? How holily and how purely should we live! As our apostle argues in another place, "For what fellowship has righteousness and unrighteousness? What communion has light with darkness? Or what concord has Christ with Belial?" Shall those who are temples of the living God, suffer themselves to be dens of thieves and cages of unclean birds? Shall vain unchaste thoughts be suffered to dwell within them? Much less shall anything that is impure be conceived or acted by them? Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? God forbid! We all know with what distinguished ardor our blessed Redeemer purged an earthly temple; a zeal for his father's house even ate him up: with what a holy vehemence did he overturn the tables of the money-changers, and scourge the buyers and sellers out before him! Why? They made his father's house a house of merchandise: they had turned the house of prayer into a den of thieves.

O my brethren, how often have you and I been guilty of this great evil? How often have the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, insensibly stolen away our hearts from God? Once they were indeed houses of prayer; faith, hope, love, peace, joy, and all the other fruits of the blessed Spirit lodged within them; but now, O now, it may be, thieves and robbers. Hence those hidings of God's face, that dryness, and deadness, and barrenness of soul, those wearisome nights and days, which many of us have felt from time to time, and have been made to groan under. Hence those dolorous and heart-breaking complaints, "O that I knew where I might find him! O that it was with me as in days of old, when the candle of the Lord shone bright upon my soul!" Hence those domestic trials, those personal losses and disappointments: and to this perhaps some of us

may add, hence all those public rebukes with which we have been visited: they are all only as so many scourges of small cords in the loving Redeemer's hands, to scourge the buyers and sellers out of the temple of our hearts. O that we may know the rod and who has appointed it! He has chastised us with whips: may we be wise, and by a more close and circumspect walk prevent his chastising us in time to come with scorpions! But who is sufficient for this thing? None but you, O Lord, to whom alone all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden! Cleanse you therefore the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your blessed Spirit, that henceforward we may more perfectly love you and more worthily magnify your holy name!

But are not some of you ready to object, and to fear, that the Lord has forgotten to be gracious, that he has shut up his loving kindness in displeasure, and that he will be no more entreated? Thus the psalmist once thought, when visited for his backslidings with God's heavy hand. But he acknowledged this to be his infirmity; and whether you think of it or no, I tell you, this is your infirmity. O you dejected, desponding, distrustful souls, hear you the word of the Lord, and call to mind his wonderful declarations of old to his people. "I, even I am He that blots out your transgressions: for a small moment have I forsaken you, but with everlasting mercies will I gather you. Can a woman forget her sucking child? Yes she may, but the Lord will not forget you, O you of little faith. For as a father pities his own children, so does the Lord pity them that fear him. How shall I give you up, O Ephraim? How shall I make you as Admah? How shall I set you as Zeboim?" And what is the result of all these interrogations? "My repentings are kindled together: I will not return to execute the fierceness of my anger against Ephraim: For I am God, and not man." And is not the language of all these endearing passages, like that of Joseph to his self-convicted, troubled brethren? "Come near to me." O that it may be said of you, as it is said of them, "And they came near unto him." Then should you find by happy experience, that the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, is indeed slow to anger and of great kindness, and repents him of the evil. Who knows but he may come down this day, this hour, nay this moment, and suddenly revisit the temple of your hearts. Who knows but he may revive his work in your precious souls, cause you to return to your first love, help you to do your first works, and even exceed your hopes, and cause the glory of this second visitation even to surpass that glory which filled your hearts, in that happy, never to be forgotten day, in which he first vouchsafed to make you his living temples. Even so, Father, let it seem good in your sight!

But the improvement of our subject must not end here. Hitherto I have been giving bread to the children; and it is my meat and drink so to do: but must nothing be said to those of you who are without? I mean to such who cannot yet say, that they are "the temple of the living God." And O how great, put you all together, may the number of you be: by far, in all probability, the greatest part of this auditory. Say not I am uncharitable; the God of truth, has said it, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it." Suffer me to speak plainly to you, my brethren; you have heard what has been said upon the words of our text, and what must be wrought in us, ere we

can truly say that we are "the temple of the living God." Is it so with you? Are you separated from the world and worldly tempers? Are your hearts become houses of prayer? Does the Spirit of God dwell in your souls? And whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever you do, as to the habitual bent of your minds, do you do all to the glory of God? These are short, but plain, and let me tell you very important questions. What answer can you make to them? Say not, "Go your way, and at a more convenient season I will call for you." I will not, I must not suffer you to put me off so; I demand an answer in the name of the Lord of Hosts. What say you? Methinks, I hear you say, We have been dedicated to God in baptism, we go to church or meeting, we say our prayers, repeat our creeds, or have subscribed the articles, and the confession of faith; we are quite orthodox, and great friends to the doctrines of grace; we do no body any harm, we are honest moral people, we are church-members, we keep up family-prayer, and constantly go to the table of the Lord." All these things are good in their places. But thus far, nay much farther may you go, and yet be far from the kingdom of God. The unprofitable servant did no one any harm; and the foolish virgins had a lamp of an outward profession, and went up even to heaven's gate, calling Christ, "Lord, Lord." These things may make you whited sepulchers, but not "the temples of the loving God." Alas! Alas! one thing you yet lack, the one chief thing, and without which all is nothing; I mean the indwelling of God's blessed Spirit, without which you can never become "the temples of the living God."

Awake therefore, you deceived formalists, awake; who, vainly puffed up with your model of performances, boastingly cry out, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord we are." Awake, you outward-court worshippers: you are building on a sandy foundation: take heed lest you also go to hell by the very door of heaven. Behold, and remember, I have told you before.

And as for you who have done none of these things, who instead of making an outward profession of religion, have as it were renounced your baptism, proclaim your sin like Sodom, and willfully and daringly live without God in the world; I ask you, how can you think to escape, if you persist in neglecting such a great salvation. Verily, I should utterly despair of your ever attaining the blessed privilege of being temples of the living God, did I not hear of thousands, who through the grace of God have been translated from a like state of darkness into his marvelous light. Such, says the apostle Paul, writing to these very Corinthians who were now God's living temples, (drunkards, whoremongers, adulterers, and such like) "such were some of you. But you are washed, but you are sanctified, but you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." O that the same blessed Spirit may this day vouchsafe to come and pluck you also as brands out of the burning! Behold, I warn you to flee from the wrath to come. Go home, and meditate on these things; and think whether it is not infinitely better, even here, to be temples of the living God, than to be bondslaves to every brutish lust, and to be led captive by the devil at his will. The Lord Jesus can, and if you fly to him for refuge, he will set your souls at liberty. He has led captivity captive, he has ascended up on high, on purpose to receive this gift of the blessed Spirit of God for men, "even for the

rebellious," that he might dwell in your hearts by faith here, and thereby prepare you to dwell with Him and all the heavenly host in his kingdom hereafter.

That this may be the happy lot of you all, may God of his infinite mercy grant, for the sake of his dear Son Christ Jesus our Lord; to whom with the father, and the blessed Spirit, three persons, but one God, be ascribed all power, might, majesty, and dominion, now and for evermore. Amen! And Amen!