

Built Tough. Built Strong.
Sunday, January 12, 2020

Have you ever thought about all the different types of dwelling places there are? There are houses. Apartments. Caves. Condos. Tents. Treehouses. RVs. What else?...

Yes there are many types of dwelling places.

And we know that our bodies are considered “dwelling places” of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in I Cor. 6:19 that our bodies are “temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in us.”

Just a couple of years later, Paul urges believers, in Romans 12:1, to consider their bodies a “living sacrifice.” The Message helps us understand this a bit better with these words: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering.”

No wonder David cried out in Psalm 51:10, “Create in me a clean heart, O God... a right spirit!” God is always ready to do that for us. When we gather for worship together on Sunday mornings, it’s an especially good time to be spiritually cleansed, nourished and refreshed. Go ahead. Call out to Him now. Personally. Privately.

Ah Lord... send down Your refreshing, cleansing Spirit upon us even now... Your Word tells us whenever two or more of us are gathered in Your name, You are here among us. Cleanse us. Refresh us. Illuminate us.

We’re still at the beginning of a new year, a new month, (though it’s slipping away quickly), and a new decade.

We’re still thinking about how this year, this decade, might be different, or better than before. As we think about making things better, I’d like us all to think about where we live, or dwell. Where do we spend the majority of our time?

Aside from our actual physical lodgings, have we ever thought about the fact that not only does Christ live in us as believers, but that we live in Him? Together?

Let’s look at Ephesians 2:19-22 this morning.

Last week we spoke of the fact that Paul wrote this letter, this book of Ephesians, to the beloved people in the beloved church in Ephesus. He was writing from prison. He sent this precious letter to his friends at Ephesus by someone who was visiting him from Ephesus: Tychicus. “TIK uh kuhs.” He’s mentioned fondly in several books in the New Testament and was obviously someone who Paul trusted.

Paul wanted this church to know how it was to function as a body of Christ. The words he wrote to his original audience were also meant to be circulated to the others churches as well. They are meant to be circulated to us, too.

We learn from God through Paul how He wants His church to function.

When we function effectively as the body of Christ, the church, then God is glorified and our lives are enhanced as we get to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.

We spoke last week of our vision statement which is... fully devoted followers of Christ impacting communities for God.

When we are living out God's wishes, acting and interacting as His precious body, we impact others for Him. Their lives are enhanced as well.

In Ephesians, Paul is reminding the believers of who they are, in order that they can be the body of Christ who reminds others of who they are: People made in the image of God. Created to do good works. Set free. Sanctified. Made alive. New Creations. One in Christ with all believers. Blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Holy and blameless. Adopted as God's children. Forgiven.

Before we go any further, do you know that about yourself? Have you fully embraced what it means to belong to Christ?

Do you know you've been set free? Received God's righteousness? Given the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know Him better? Do you know you have His "incomparably great power for us who believe?"

In chapter two, Paul continues to help believers understand their full identity in Christ. There had been confusion about being a Jewish Christian believer, but Paul, (who was one of these himself), says the Jew and Gentile are reconciled through Christ. (A Gentile, by the way, is simply anyone who isn't a Jew.)

So by verse 19, Paul is saying "Welcome to the family." You're no longer "foreigners and strangers," or as the original Greek language puts it, "strangers and aliens."

You're one of God's people now. You're a member of His household.

This gives us identity.

This gives us esteem. This gives us hope.

And it gives us a sense of belonging. Sometimes we feel closer to people in a church family than our own human family.

When we live in harmony with each other, and in accordance with what is in God's Word, we are citizens of God's kingdom. Members of His house.

And all of this is built on what came before us, the spiritual heritage of those people of faith who have come before us... all the way from our parents or that friend who brought us to Christ, back to the generation of faith before them, and before them, and so on.

All the way back to God's first people.

And Jesus is "the chief cornerstone" of it all.

Paul is using a lot of "builder language" with words like "foundation" and "cornerstone" in this section of Ephesians. And for good reason. He's describing the church.

One of the reasons I've loved worshiping and serving in this school for eleven years this April, (*yes, eleven! Can you believe it?!*), is that people who come and join and become part of this body of Christ, and stay, fully understand that the church is not a building! The church is the people!

And Jesus is the strongest, most important part.

Peter writes a lot about this in his first letter, I Peter, chapter 2.

He says that as we come to Him, “the living Stone - rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him” (2:4)- don’t miss that part... Jesus is precious to God.

He needs to be precious to us, too.

Then Peter goes on to say, “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood...” (:5).

There’s more of that builder language.

Built strong. Built tough.

We’re “being built...” Notice the tense of the verb. Not, we “were built,” or “we will be built,” but we are being built!

As Peter describes the church as God’s spiritual house, he’s drawing on several Old Testament texts that would have been familiar to his Jewish listeners.

Aside from those Scriptures, there are others which speak of building.

Psalm 127:1 says, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain.” In all of our endeavors, whatever we are attempting to build, we must have God at the center of it, the cornerstone, in order for it to succeed, and be strong. And last.

Proverbs 14:1 says “The wise woman builds her house.” In other words, like we said last week, we either bless or curse with our mouths. A wise person builds, rather than destroys. We heard last week that Solomon told his son to eat honey, and that God’s wisdom is sweet, like honey.

When we seek God’s wisdom first, we build, rather than destroy. Our lives center on those things which are true, noble and just. Lovely, pure and of good report. Virtuous and praiseworthy. Life is sweet, because of the presence of Christ within it.

Are we building? Or are we destroying?

Do we build up and edify others? Or do we constantly tear them down with that drip-drip-drip of continual negativity?

Proverbs has something to say about that, too.

In the book of Exodus, in the Old Testament, Moses met with God in a special tent he set up. It was called the “tent of meeting.”

Let’s hear the words from Exodus 33:7-11.

“The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” (33:11a)

The Lord was in the tent of meeting. With Moses. And dear Joshua, too, who was so enamored of the Lord’s presence he didn’t even want to leave.

Dear people of this body of Christ! Dear Cross Creekers! Dear Guests!

Let’s be people so in love with God we never want to leave His Presence either!

If you’re familiar with the Bible, you know that God went on to do mighty things through Joshua, Moses’ assistant who went on to be a great leader in his own right.

This message is all about dwelling in the Presence of Christ and His Presence within us, together.

We're no longer outside the loop. We're in it! We're God's people, members of His house! We've got a rock-solid foundation! And it's not going anywhere!

With Christ as the center of us, we are "joined together," and "rising up!" The Greeks says we're being fitted together and increasing into a holy temple.

Notice, again, this is language which says it's happening now, and ongoing. It takes a while to be fitted together.

We may need some sanding off of rough edges.

Or perhaps we haven't found our place in the body yet. Don't give up.

We'll help you to with that. {*Spiritual gifts... and in fact Paul wrote to desire the gifts that build up the church!*}

As we're being fitted together, perhaps we have to be more flexible. And forgiving. We might have to show more grace. And love.

As we let God mold us and shape us, ("the Potter and the clay"), we become a better fit. Then, we can rise up. Increase. Have more of the light of Christ shine from us.

After that verse in Ephesians 2:21, we get to 2:22!

"And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit."

We are being "built together."

Built strong. Built tough.

The original language says we're being built together for a habitation of the Spirit of God.

In Matthew and Luke, Jesus warned about what type of foundation we choose on which to build our lives. As people of God being built together In Christ, we want to make sure our foundation is Him!

If you pitch a tent on the solid ground of Blue Spring or Juniper Spring State Park, you'll still find your tent there in the morning.

If you chose, instead, to pitch your tent on the seashore as the tide is going out, you'll be in for a big shock in the morning when the tide has come back in. Or a few hours before that!

The point is what we build our lives on matters. On what are you building your life? Where does the majority of your money go? Where do you spend the most time? With whom do you spend the most time?

Paul has already told us, and God is already at work in building us together, to actually be a dwelling where the Holy Spirit dwells!

So let's embrace that! Let's celebrate that!

We are becoming a dwelling fit for a King! King Jesus.

You may remember the scene where Jesus is transfigured right before Peter's eyes. (Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36, and 2 Peter 1:16-18.) He was with James and John, and while Jesus and his clothes rose up and turned bright, sparkling white, Elijah and Moses joined him.

Peter was so struck with the majesty of the scene, he wanted to stay there forever. Just like Joshua in the tent of meeting. He didn't want to leave. He wanted to put up three tents, or tabernacles.

We know that the word "tabernacle" also means to "dwell."

Peter wanted to dwell in the presence of a foretaste of the risen Christ forever.

Remember that question at the beginning of this message? What type of dwellings are there?

The best type of dwelling is the one in which God is present.

In Him, we too are being built together to become a place of meeting... a tabernacle... a dwelling... in which God lives by His Spirit.

Isn't that a marvelous thought? Doesn't that paint a beautiful picture?

At the beginning of this month's Upper Room devotional, there is a write up of the painting on the cover.

The painting is called "The Baptism of Christ," by Daniel Bonnell (USA, Contemporary)

In the write up of the painting, the author speaks of "listening" to the painting.

She says this, "In an essay, artist Daniel Bonnell describes his contemplative process of "being present with a work of art, sitting in silence, visually listening."

Visually listening.

Of course we know that we see, or have vision, with our eyes, and we listen, or hear, with our ears. So how can someone listen with their eyes?

This makes me think of last week's message, also from Ephesians, where Paul says he prays that "the eyes of their hearts" will be enlightened...

He wants them to be able to see from their hearts, instead of their heads.

He wants them to know the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To know them deeply and intimately.

He wants them to have such spiritual insight and understanding that they will know the hope to which God has called us, the riches of His Kingdom, and His "incomparably great power for us who believe." (1:17-19)

Let's determine that in this new year we will make more time to get to know God better. Let's determine that in this new year we will use our gifts to build up the church.

As the author wrote at the end of her short article about the painting, "let us strive to listen with our eyes and hearts, seeking out the presence of God in our lives."

I've thought about that statement too. Is there more of the presence of God around us than we're aware of?

If so, how do we tap into that? What does it look like to live as someone who is loved? A member of God's house. Let's look around and see with whom we're really joined. How do we build strong? How do we build tough?

We remember that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9,10) We don't have to keep trying to do it all. We do have to step back and trust Him more and others also. We don't give up. We don't give in.

We do need to keep our eyes on Christ. Not keep letting them fall back and stay on our circumstances. Wrench them off of ourselves, and put them back on Jesus. It's not easy to do but makes all the difference.
"Stay above the fray."

We keep God at the center. We seek His wisdom. We stay close to Him.
(Joshua. Peter.)

And we trust that God is keeping His word and we are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit. It's already happening! Trust it. Embrace it. And do your part to continue to be built together and become that dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit!

When Paul was saying his tearful farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he said these words in 20:32 "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Paul had cared for them, loved them, even cried over their needs.

They responded with love and care for him and sorrow over his leaving.

They had prayed together and comforted one another. Like Paul, we can build strong relationships with others by sharing life together.

We gather others around us when we give ourselves away to them. Like Paul. Like Jesus.

Built strong. Built tough. Lasts forever. Together.