



Words of Eternal Living

1 Kings 8:22-43; Ps 84; John 6:56-69; Ephesians 6:10-20

What is the point of faith? Some have written about John's letter we call Revelation as a letter about the "end times", centuries removed from the events of John's day. Why, however, would believers suffering intense persecution have bothered preserving and copying something as irrelevant as that? There were much more pressing concerns than worrying about some distant future when the earth would be destroyed. They kept the letter, read it, and circulated it because they found it relevant to their persecution and suffering under Domitian and subsequent Roman rulers. Revelation called them to live in affirmation of faith in the ultimate triumph of the One who had faced the cross and death and then risen victorious over the violence of God's enemies. It was applicable to their daily life with God—it made a difference in their response to the pressures of living a faithful witness.

Along a similar vein, there was purpose to Solomon's building the Temple in Jerusalem. It was not a symbol of the future. It was not a symbol of the past. It was no homage to an ethereal reality. It was more than a building for them to treasure and maintain. It was an affirmation of God's presence among the nation of Israel. The temple was a visible reminder both of God's promise and the people's responsibility. *Yahweh* would be faithful to the covenant promise, maintaining an heir to David on the throne. That promise was conditioned, however, on the people walking faithfully in the ways of God.

The temple was to speak to the nation and the world beyond. It was to call all peoples to know and serve *Yahweh* in sincere commitment. It was not about God away in heaven. It was about the ongoing relationship between *Yahweh* and Israel. Being *Yahweh's* people meant following the pattern of life *Yahweh* set before them. They could count on God's blessings, but only as they turned to God in faithful service, day in and day out. God was present, but not to be taken for granted.

There was a point behind being God's people. There was a purpose to the temple far beyond its being a gathering place for the community of Israel. It was to signal a commitment that was sometimes hard to hear and even harder to fulfill. It was to point the people beyond themselves, their passions, and their concerns to the concerns of God.

Jesus came as the human temple of God Most High. John's gospel begins by speaking of Jesus as God's word made flesh. Those words, however, were not always easy to hear. The disciples balked at his words from time to time. Then again, their purpose was not to make everyone happy. Jesus was not overly worried about stepping on an ego or someone's feelings. He was concerned with pointing people to the gospel truth and responsible living before God. If someone took offense at his words, they might not follow him in discipleship. They would, however, still present an account before God for their lives.

Jesus was aware that his words in John 6 sounded cannibalistic on the surface. He was well aware that many would brush his words off as so much gibberish. He also knew that someone seriously seeking God would look beyond the surface for his deeper meaning. In fact, he required that we look deeper, make an effort to understand, and invest our very lives in learning the things and ways of God. "Do my words offend you?" he would say, "Do you also wish to go away?"

An emotional response to Jesus' words does alter the truth in his message. One's reaction doesn't change the reality behind Jesus' words. One may turn away from Jesus, but must still answer to God. If

we want to live eternally in God's presence, bowing our lives to the presence and lordship of Jesus as the Christ is not optional. We must live as Jesus taught or spend eternity without God. After all is said and done, this is the point of salvation. We are saved from who we would otherwise be that we might become the people God designed us to be.

Paul framed this issue of life allegiance another way. He spoke of putting on the full armor of God in light of a spiritual battle. To speak of a spiritual battle, however, he had first to remind the Ephesians that the real struggle was not the one which so concerned them. They struggled with human opposition and conflict. They were aware of persecution from many fronts that made life so difficult. It was persecution, after all, that had forced Paul to leave Ephesus after some three years of ministry there. They understood struggle for power, wealth, and influence. They were versed in underhanded tactics and the use of deceit to attain a desired goal. None of this, however, addressed the real issues at hand. They were the wrong tools for the wrong battle.

The persecution they faced was about power and control. The weapons they knew from their experience in the world were unfit for the issues that truly mattered. They were to let go of the tactics of the society around them and employ the armor and weapons appropriate for spiritual issues. As long as they focused on the issues the world deemed important, they would be losing the real battle—the one that was truly relevant and meaningful. It was only as they focused on spiritual realities, on the deeper struggles of life, that they had a chance for meaningful victory—one that truly made a difference.

They were to stand with truth instead of deceit—God's truth. They were to stand with the righteousness of Christ, not with underhanded practices. They were to stand with a message of peace, not contention. They were to stand with faith, rather than distrust and fear. They were to dress in salvation, not in the guise of a life without Christ. They were to wield the presence of God's Spirit, not the weapons of human struggles. Prayer and supplication to God were to govern their actions. They were to live and act as they had seen Paul do, always speaking the mystery of the gospel of faith, love, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God. They were to confront the difficulties and conflicts of life in the very same manner Jesus had faced them.

As the temple built by Solomon was supposed to do, the character of our actions should announce the presence of God among us. The way these Ephesian believers acted and interacted was to portray the presence of Christ Jesus, living within their hearts and impacting their lives. This is the real battle we are called to be waging. It is the war in which we are enmeshed, whether or not we recognize its reality and importance.

There is a popular saying we call the duck test. We say that if a bird looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck. If it does not look, swim, and quack like a duck, however, why would we believe it to be one? The definitions of the term duck militate against applying the name to something contrary the bird's nature.

In the same sense, as Christians, we are to live, talk, and act like Christ Jesus—the One we call Lord. The purpose of living with Christ is to invite and reflect God's presence before the world around us. If we are not reflecting Christ Jesus, can we really consider ourselves Christians? If we do not look like Jesus, talk like Jesus, and act like Jesus, our claims are just empty words without eternal living.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*