

Presence

Valleys Family Church Sermon
Stuart Wheatman, Sunday 4th August April 2013

Intro

- Ascetism is extreme denial of bodily comfort in order to get closer to God. It is known in different forms in various religions including Christianity.
- There was a Christian named Simeon Stylites who was born in 388 AD, in Turkey. He was very serious about seeking the presence of God and went into a monastery before he was 16 years of age. On one occasion, moving nearby, he commenced a severe regime of fasting for Lent and was visited by the head of the monastery, who left him some water and loaves. A number of days later, Simeon was discovered unconscious, with the water and loaves untouched. When he was brought back to the monastery, it was discovered that he had bound his waist with a girdle made of palm fronds so tightly that days of soaking were required to remove the fibres from the wound formed. At this, Simeon was requested to leave the monastery.
- He then shut himself up for one and a half years in a hut, where he passed the whole of Lent without eating or drinking. When he emerged from the hut, his achievement was hailed as a miracle. He later took to standing continually upright so long as his limbs would sustain him.
- After one and a half years in his hut, Simeon sought a rocky eminence on the slopes of a nearby mountain and compelled himself to remain a prisoner within a narrow space, less than 20 meters in diameter. But crowds of pilgrims invaded the area to seek him out, asking his counsel or his prayers, and leaving him insufficient time for his own devotions. This at last led him to adopt a new way of life. He is most famous for living atop a pillar for many years in the brutal Syrian heat, eating only once a week, and praying continuously. His first pillar was little more than four meters high, but his well-wishers subsequently replaced it with others, the last in the series being apparently over 15 meters from the ground. At the top of the pillar was a platform, with railings which is believed to have been about one square meter. Simeon would not allow any woman to come near his pillar, not even his own mother, reportedly telling her, "If we are worthy, we shall see one another in the life to come." Martha submitted to this. Remaining in the area, she also embraced the monastic life of silence and prayer. When she died, Simeon asked that her remains be brought to him. He reverently bade farewell to his dead mother, and, according to the account, a smile appeared on her face. After spending 37 years on his pillar, Simeon died on 2 September 459. He inspired many imitators, and, for the next century, ascetics living on pillars, 'stylites', were a common sight throughout the region. A statue commemorating St. Simeon's asceticism can be found in Grimsby town centre, UK (source Wikipedia).
- What do we need to do today to get the presence of God?

Read Eph 2:1-22

1. **Jesus has done everything necessary for us to access to the presence of God**
 - 2:14 'He has broken down the middle wall of separation'
 - Every done any scrumping, or trespassing as a child? Remember that nervous feeling? When we think of the presence of God maybe we get the same feeling- this is an area we don't belong in. Certainly that was the feeling conveyed when the temple in Jerusalem was still standing. There were two barriers keeping people out of the presence of God: the dividing wall and the curtain.
THE DIVIDING WALL
 - During excavations of Jerusalem in 1871, two archaeologists, Clermont and Ganneau, discovered what is known as the Soreg Inscription. Written in Greek, the sign warns non-Jews to keep out of the temple area. It states: "No foreigner is to enter the barriers surrounding the sanctuary. He who is caught will have himself to blame for his death which will follow."
 - Jewish historian Josephus also mentions this inscription in chapter 15 of his work, Antiquities of the Jews: "The centre of the structure was the tallest, with the front wall being built with beams which sat upon interlocking pillars. Highly glossed stones made up this wall, so finely polished that those who looked upon it for the first time marvelled at it in amazement. This was the description of the first structure. Located within it, and nearby, were steps which led up to the second structure, which was surrounded by a stone wall used as a barrier, engraved with an inscription not allowing foreigners to enter into it under the penalty of death."
 - This is the 'wall of separation' to which Paul refers in 2:14. It kept Gentiles (non-Jews) out and allowed Jews through to get closer to the presence of God. It could become a source of enmity between the two.
 - The writer of the passage we have read, the apostle Paul, once was almost killed due to false rumours that he took a Gentile beyond this wall (see Acts 21:27-31).

- THE CURTAIN
 - The temple consisted of outer courtyards, a holy place and the holy of holies. The holy of holies signified the very presence of God. No one could go into the holy of holies except the High Priest, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement to offer ceremonial sacrifices for the forgiveness of the people (Hebrews 9:7).
 - A huge, thick curtain stopped anyone from accidentally going into the Holy of Holies. The curtain was said to be a hand-breadth thick. Josephus says- 'It was large and costly, some sixty feet high, and made of rich materials. Josephus ('Bell. Jud.,' 5:05. 4) tells us of one of the veils in the temple, that it was a Babylonian curtain, embroidered with linen in various colours, woven together with wonderful art, such as the eye loved to rest upon.'
 - When Jesus died on the cross this curtain was torn in two from top to bottom: [Matthew 27:51](#)
At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split
 - The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Mk 15:38)
- [Luke 23:45](#)
for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.
- the tearing of the curtain- there is no record of this in Jewish writings, but, interestingly enough, there is record of something significant happening. Rabbis claimed that about 40 years before the destruction of the temple (i.e. coinciding with the date Jesus was crucified), it's enormous doors swung open by themselves and were found that way in the morning (y. Yoma 6:43c; b. Yoma 39b), an event which was interpreted by the rabbis as predicting its ultimate destruction (Sifre Deut. §328 [on Deut 32:38]). The event was allegedly "heard through eight Sabbath limits" (b. Yoma 39b)- (that is about 4 miles away!). Josephus himself mentions that the enormous brass eastern gate of the inner court, which could hardly be moved by twenty men, was seen opening by itself at midnight.
 - Jews were a bit closer than Gentiles, but both were really a million miles away as neither could enter God's presence. So Jesus removed the barrier for Gentiles (the dividing wall) and He removed the curtain for both Jews and Gentiles- He was giving ACCESS to both- see 2:18 'For by Him we both have ACCESS by one Spirit to the Father'
 - [19](#)Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, [20](#)by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh,... [Heb 10:19](#)
 - The Holy of Holies was a picture of Heaven. The High Priest going through the curtain was a picture of Jesus going into Heaven. The fact that he tore the curtain open through His death meant he was saying to us 'come on in'- 'come into the presence of God'.
 - Eph 2:6 -He made us sit together in the heavenly place in Christ Jesus.
 - **Application-**
 - The key to the presence of God is in believing the gospel. We think that the presence of God isn't going to come until we've 'tarried', 'fasted', 'prayed', 'read the Bible' etc. etc. While all these things may well be good, they could never open up the presence of God to us. But JESUS HAS! He is the Door! He is the Gate! He is the Way!
- 2. We, the Church, are to be the dwelling place of God**
- 2:19 (you are) 'members of the household of God..being fitted together grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in who you are also being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.'
 - There was an ongoing debate between Jews and Samaritans as to where God was to be worshipped. Jews knew God had chosen Jerusalem as the place for His

temple to be built and Jews throughout the kingdom would travel to Jerusalem three times yearly for the pilgrimages of the Jewish holy days of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot as prescribed in the law. But the Samaritans built a rival temple on Mount Girizim in Samaria, and they said this was the place God had chosen instead. Jesus met a Samaritan woman and she brought this up as a matter of contention, and Jesus said an interesting thing for a Jew- that neither there nor in Jerusalem would be the place where God would be worshipped, but that the true worshippers would worship in spirit and truth. This ties in with what Jesus came to do- give us access to the Father by the One Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Jesus is saying that with Him there comes a shift from needing to constantly **make pilgrimage** to find God, to having access to His Spirit in ANY LOCATION. People love to go where God is 'moving', but what is really happening? What is happening is that in these environments people's faith increases and they start believing that the barrier between them and God is actually less than they had previously thought, and they take the 'move' with them. However, through the gospel God has shown His ongoing willingness to 'move in power' in any location- the earth is His and the gospel of His kingdom is to impact each nation, why don't we start believing in the full gospel more?

- What is a temple? It is a place where God, or a god dwells. But God's ultimate aim is not to dwell in a physical building but to dwell in His people. Originally He did- in Eden, but sin created a barrier to His presence dwelling with us- mankind was expelled from the garden of Eden.
- God gave a picture to us of our restoration into His household- it was the picture of the tent and the temple. Both of these are pictures of the human body, also called a 'tent' and a 'temple'. God was communicating His plans to one day reconcile mankind to Himself so that His dwelling could be with mankind again.
- One of the purposes of the Church is to be the dwelling place of God. It is the fulfilment of the gospel- that Jesus redeemed a people for Him to dwell in. 'In Christ' is repeated so many times in Ephesians! The Church as individuals and also together is the fulfilment of what Jesus came for- to dwell in us individually and corporately.
- FULL GOSPEL- Many Christians have faith for this once we die, but Jesus died that we could have access to His presence now on earth.
- 'Household of God'- 2:19 God has made us family- John 14:23 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him'. We obey Jesus' word by firstly believing the gospel- the result of this is that God sends His Spirit to come and live in our lives. John 14:18 'I will not leave you as orphans I will come to you'. Intimacy, adoption Spirit of adoption by which we cry 'Abba, Daddy'- Rom 8:14-17.
- **Application**- let God fill your 'temple' -your body. Be filled with the Holy Spirit.
- Avoid sin because God considers your body to be holy- it's the place He loves to dwell, therefore look after it and don't spoil it with sin (see 1Cor 6:19-20 'Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in you body and in your spirit which are God's').
- 1Cor 3:16-17 'Do you not know that you (plural) are the temple of God (i.e. their congregation) and that the Spirit of God dwells in you (plural). If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you (plural) are'. We must respect the Church and build those in the Church up rather than pull them down- let's be careful what comes out of our lips- we will one day give an account to the One who dwells in the temple of the Church, so be at peace with your brothers and sisters- sort out differences, don't let there be a

dividing wall of hostility between each other.

3. We access the presence by faith

- If Jesus has truly taken away all the barriers to us experiencing the fullness of the presence of God now, then why aren't we experiencing it? Two reasons, desire and faith.
- Desire- sometimes we don't want to experience the presence of God because we know it will mean change for us- a giving up of sin that we secretly cherish. Sin is really replacing the satisfaction God brings into our lives with some other satisfaction which is only temporary and never will truly satisfy long-term. He has come to give us life in abundance- He has the best plan for our lives- let's not sell ourselves short.
- Faith- faith is essential. It doesn't matter how much we desire the presence of God, if we have no faith it will be no good to us. Faith pleases God and accesses the promises of God. We can only be saved by faith, not by desire- it's only when we actually believe what Christ has done that we truly find salvation.
- In the same way, if we want to experience the presence of God then we must simply believe that we have access to His presence right now because of the gospel.
- John 7:37 Jesus said 'If anyone thirsts (desire), let him come to Me and drink (response of faith). He who believes in Me (faith), as scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'. The Jews at this point in time were in the process of drawing water from the pool of Siloam and pouring it at the altar in Jerusalem. The reason they did this was the belief that when the Messiah came the prophecy of Ezekiel (47) would be fulfilled and living water would flow out from the altar of the temple in Jerusalem, the belly button of the world. Jesus is here claiming to be the Messiah and saying that He would fulfil that expectation, but again, not in a physical building but rather in the temple of each believer, and also in the gatherings of believers trusting in Him. Ezekiel's prophecy speaks about the water increasing as it flows from the altar and bringing life wherever it goes. This is a picture of the life and 'outpouring' that God always planned for each believer to experience and carry wherever they go. Surely this is what we see in the book of Acts. Surely this is what we have seen in great moves of God during times of revival- there is a spilling over into the community and whole communities, and even countries are saturated in the presence of God. Why not let's believe God and let those rivers flow out of us?
- Boldness is faith with boots on. It characterises faith and also timidity characterises unbelief. God hasn't given us a spirit of timidity. As we realise scriptural truth afresh so it makes us bold- we realise there are priceless gifts before us which we've been able to open but we thought they were out of bounds. It makes us want to boldly open these gifts. One of these gifts is the gift of His presence open to us all. Eph 3:12 '...in whom (Jesus) we have **boldness** and access with confidence through **faith in Him**. We realise and accept what Christ has done it makes us BOLD and we ACCESS the presence of God!
- Eph 3:1 and Eph 3:14 both say 'for this reason'. For what reason? Paul is saying that because we have unlimited access to the presence of God due to the Gospel (bar the actual 'face to face' with the Father, which will come in Heaven) he prays that God would strengthen them all with might through His Spirit (dwelling) in their inner man (v16), that Christ may DWELL IN THEIR HEARTS BY FAITH.....THAT THEY MAY BE FILLED WITH ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD'. Paul certainly didn't think they had to wait to get to Heaven or wait for a move of God- it was available to them NOW they just needed to believe it and receive it!

- **Application-** you may have asked a million times to be filled with His Spirit, but not really believed that God wanted to fill you, or believed that you had to jump through a load of hoops first- simply accept the gospel (repentance and faith) and ask God to fill you, believing He will and you will be filled.
- Have you previously known closeness with God and allowed unbelief to creep in, perhaps because of sin? Repent and allow the river of His presence to flow again in your life.
- Have you always felt like you were missing out, that God was always breaking out somewhere else? Allow Him to 'break out' in your life right here and now. Be filled.

4. We must keep on the right foundation

- 2:20 '...having been built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone'
- What does this mean? It means that the Church is built on the revelation given to the original Apostles and their teaching directly from the mouth of Christ as well as their eye-witness testimony of His life along with their prophetic revelation of the gospel (such as Paul having received the gospel by revelation without chatting to the other Apostles). It means this because of Eph 3:5- the Gospel had been previously hidden from other generations but what was formerly a mystery hidden in God alone was now revealed to the Prophets and Apostles of that generation to be passed on to future generations. This is the unadulterated gospel as recorded in the Scriptures which must be our foundation. It means that our foundation is not our own thoughts or feelings or individuals revelations, but that which is recorded in scripture and passed on to us- Apostolic doctrine (which is what the early Church dedicated to -see Acts 2:42)- let's never veer away from scripture, it is foundational.
- Does this mean we reject modern day Apostles and Prophets? By no means, but what they bring must be lined up against the foundation of what the new Testament Apostles and Prophets have written down for us in Scripture.
- Does this mean that we throw out our personal revelation? By no means, we love personal revelation from God, but we weigh everything according to scriptural truth, hold on to the good and throw out the bad.
- Keeping this foundation of the truth of the gospel of grace will protect us from thinking that we have 'lost' the presence of God or need to earn it in some way by our spiritual disciplines. We do spiritual disciplines, not to earn the presence of God- we already have that, but rather to engage the Spirit of God- we tune ourselves into Him through our disciplines. This is what it means to keep on the right foundation. It is what Paul wanted for all the Churches he wrote to and what he was so concerned about in the Galatian Church, that they had drifted from trust and were relying on their own efforts to earn God's presence. Let's keep our foundation correct.

Summary

- Jesus has opened up access to God's presence for us
- We are the dwelling place of God
- We access the presence by faith
- We must keep our foundation right

Song?

Ministry time