

“The Unshakable Kingdom of Christ”

Psalm 126

When King David wrote the Psalms around 1,000 B.C., Israel had much to be thankful for. God had delivered them from 400 years in Egyptian slavery and from 40 years of wandering in the desert. They entered the Promise Land and divide it into 12 states named after the 12 sons of Jacob – the 12 tribes of Israel. They unite under King Saul and then the golden age of King David and his son, Solomon, who builds the beautiful temple on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem.

With a smile on his face, David writes in Psalm 126:1-3 . . . ¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion; we were like those who dream. ²Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." ³The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

It doesn't last. In 587 B.C., the kingdom now divided between north and south, between Israel and Judah is conquered by Babylonia, the temple is destroyed, and the leaders are taken into exile in Babylonia.

Sixty-seven years later, in 520 B.C., Babylon was overthrown by the Persians and the Jews had come under the rule of the Persian king, Cyrus the Great. It was Cyrus who allowed the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and build a second temple. They got started on construction, but the work slowed and eventually stopped. For 15 years the second temple sat unfinished.

Enter Haggai. The prophet blasted the priorities of God’s people. In fact, he told them that their suffering – from drought and other afflictions – punishment for becoming consumed with their own narrow needs and neglecting the work of God. Reminding the older generation of Jews of the splendor of Solomon’s temple. Haggai shocked them by prophesying that the sequel would be even greater. He said God planned to establish His ultimate kingdom in a New Jerusalem, with a new temple that would redeem mankind.

This motivational tactic worked. The Jews completed the temple. But Haggai’s words – at least, as the people understood them – didn’t come true. This rebuilt temple was a far cry from Solomon’s magnificent structure. Even when King Herod kicked off a building drive centuries later and made spectacular renovations to the temple, it still didn’t compare to the original.

What the Jews couldn’t comprehend, is that Haggai was prophesying a different kind of kingdom, a different kind of temple. He was telling of Jesus and His eternal sovereignty. The people were so attached to their identity, to the tangible glories of early power, that they missed the greater thing promised them.

“The more glorious latter temple that the prophet Haggai foretold has nothing to do with impressive buildings or national interests or imperial aspirations. These things are the petty ambitions of pharaohs, Caesars, and today’s oligarchs. It’s the false glory of the kingdoms of the world that the devil offered to Jesus in the wilderness temptation, and Jesus rejected.”

“The more glorious temple of which the prophet spoke is nothing more than the new temple that is the body of Christ.”

“We’ve been given a new temple, one that can never be destroyed, and we’re often too busy looking back at the old temple – something beautiful but ultimately fleeting – to appreciate the new temple in front of us.”

Nothing of man lasts. Jesus promised to raise up the temple three days after it was destroyed – a foretelling of His death and resurrection – but also prophesied that the second temple, the one built at the behest of Haggai, would be demolished. The Romans took care of that in AD 70. By that time there was no need to build another; a growing number of Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah – calling themselves Christians – preached that a new, indestructible eternal order had been established.

This changed everything. After centuries of worshipping on Saturday, these Jews declared Sunday to be holy. They began eating pork and consorting with gentiles and ignoring the Jewish priests – behavior that would have been unthinkable throughout their history. Suddenly these early Christians no longer cared about the strictures and power struggles that had consumed them. Their validation came not from a physical stronghold but from a spiritual fortress. In the New Testament epistle of Hebrews, the writer harks back to the words of Haggai, rejoicing that while God would continue to subject the world to disruption and uncertainty, “we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken.”

If only we American Christians, two millennia later, could exude such confidence. Not that we’re alone in getting mixed up. Ever since the baptism of Emperor Constantine in the middle of the fourth century, “the development toward an imperial Church and finally toward a state religion was almost a matter of necessity”, writes the German theologian Gerhard Lohfink.

Lohfink continues: “It was a grandiose attempt to create a Christian ‘empire’ and thus to unite faith, life, and culture. Only a careful look at the people of God in the Old Testament, their experiment with the state and the collapse of the experiment, could have preserved the Church from repeating the old mistake. But it was not possible in late antiquity or in the Middle Ages for people to read the Old Testament so analytically Only the history of the modern era shattered the dream. Today the experiment is truly at an end and can never be resumed.”

Throughout scripture we learn over-and-over that the glory of the latter temple is not a nation of this world, but the unshakable kingdom of Christ.” “If you place your hope in the politics of this world, you will be *greatly* shaken.”

I love America and give thanks for my ancestors who immigrated here in 1832. But I have so little faith in America. Fortunately, I’m sustained by faith placed elsewhere. “It doesn’t mean I don’t care about America; it just means I place my faith elsewhere. I place it in a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and that is the kingdom of Christ, and that is the glory of the latter temple that is greater than anything that has ever been or ever will be. Amen and amen.”

“Now, let’s come to the table and participate in the body of Christ, let us participate in the unshakable kingdom of Christ.”

May the peace of God . . .

#434 – Jesus Shall Reign