

Loving the Church: The Lord is There

Ez. 48:35

Introduction

Ezekiel's prophecy closes with this announcement: that the name of the city shall be "The Lord is there" – *Yahweh Shamah*. In the context of Ezekiel this is really wonderful news, but in the context of the history of the world, it's even more wonderful. This is the basic, most fundamental division in the world: the difference between the presence of God and the absence of God. This is the antithesis: those who long for the presence of God and those hate it, those who are comforted by the presence of God and those who are indifferent to it or despise it. This is why some who have everything feel utterly alone, and why some who have nothing feel utter peace (Gen. 28:16). And all of this is related to learning to love the Church rightly.

The Story of the Presence of the Lord

In order understand this punch line at the end of Ezekiel's vision, we have to understand all of the lead up. Remember, in the Garden of Eden God walked and talked with Adam and Eve. The Lord was there with them. When Adam sinned, he threw this life-giving privilege away, but God still pursued him and his descendants. He would meet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob under the oak or by a brook or asleep on stone or with Moses at bush. Though still full of doubt and unbelief and sin, though their families were ravaged by the effects of the Fall, God pursued His people with His presence. He came to them in Egypt and led them out of slavery with His right arm, carrying them on eagle's wings through the sea on dry ground, in the cloud and the pillar of fire, and descended in a storm on Mt. Sinai. It was unmistakable: the Lord was there. And then despite the fears and complaints of the Israelites, God said He would dwell in their midst, and be with them. So they built the tabernacle, and the Lord came and His presence was in the middle of the camp.

And then in the days of the judges, when the people would turn away from the Lord and worship idols, the Lord came again and again for His people. He was there. And then with David, the Lord drove back their enemies and the worship of God was glorified with instruments and songs and choirs. The people shouted and sang: "The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps. 46). "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God... Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion... For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in tents of wickedness" (Ps. 84). And then in the days of Solomon, a glorious temple was built and the Lord was there. But then the people forgot the Lord and turned away from Him. Thus, Ezekiel watched in a vision as the presence of the Lord left the temple (Ez. 1, 10), but then his prophecy closes with this dream of a new temple to which the Lord returns (Ez. 43), with water flowing out over the threshold and reaching to the ends of the earth for the healing of the nations (Ez. 47). And the name of the city will be "The Lord is there" – *Yahweh Shamah*.

Jesus & His Bride

All of this is unmistakably related to the coming of Christ: Emmanuel, *God with us*. What the angels announced and the shepherds witnessed in Bethlehem was that the Lord was there. When Mary and Joseph brought their baby into the temple to present Him to the Lord, old Simeon took the child up in his arms and blessed God, saying that now his eyes had seen God's salvation and the prophetess Anna began to speak of him to all those who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (Lk. 2:22-38). When Jesus told Nathanael that He had seen him under the fig tree, Nathanael exclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God, and Jesus said He was only getting started: "you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending" (Jn. 1:51). Jesus was saying that the Lord was there. And so Jesus proceeded to do what only God could do: He forgave sins, He cleansed lepers, He taught the law with authority, He walked on water, He commanded the storms, and He healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, made the lame walk, cast out demons, and raised the dead. The Lord was there. And finally at Golgotha, on that great and terrible day, He was betrayed, falsely accused, maligned, taunted, beaten, and finally crucified between two common criminals. And when Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last, a roman centurion at the foot of the cross said, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mk. 15:39) – He saw in that moment what perhaps no one else in the whole world could see: that the Lord was *still* there. And this was proven beyond a doubt on the third day, when the Lord rose from the dead. What began as a faint hope erupted into unmistakable joy – the Lord was there.

And then the Lord *left*. Or did He? No, He ascending into Heaven and poured out His Spirit on all flesh in order to build the New Jerusalem, the city of God, which Ezekiel dreamed of, the Christian Church named, *Yahweh Shamah*, The Lord is There. This city is the bride of Christ; He loves her and laid His life down for her that she might rise a glorious and noble city without any blemishes or spots or wrinkles (Eph. 5:25-27). When John saw his vision, he saw this holy city coming down out heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, and the voice said, "the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them..." (Rev. 21:3).

Conclusions & Applications

Do you love the Church the way Jesus does (Ps. 84)? We see the blemishes, the spots, and the many wrinkles of the Church, and we are tempted to despair. Pastors can be wicked, Christians are often hypocrites, and many churches are full of lies and sin and folly. And yet this is the Bride of Christ. He laid His life down for her. He shed His blood for her. He *loves* her (Ps. 87). But how can we love her when she is such a mess? We love her because our Lord is there.

The reason the gates of Hell will not prevail against her is because our Lord is there. Wherever Christians gather in joyful trembling, committed to trusting and obeying their Lord – the Lord Himself is there with them and they have nothing to fear. The gates of Hell will not prevail. The reason we do not lose hope in our day, the reason we continue to fight sin with courage is because the Lord is *here*. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world in in our midst. He is there for all our sexual sin and confusion, for all our compromises and disobedience, ready to receive us home, as men and women made in His image, whom He loves (Zeph. 3:17).