

Remember that you are required to read in your King James Bible all scriptures referenced in this lesson and in every other lesson studied in every course.

HONORING GOD'S HOUSE.

And it came to pass after this, that Joash was minded to repair the house of the Lord. . . . And he gathered together the priests and the Levites, and said to them, Go out unto the cities of Judah, and gather of all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to year, and see that ye hasten the matter. . . . So the workmen wrought, and the work was perfected by them, and they set the house of God in his state, and strengthened it. — 2 CHRON. xxiv. 4, 5, 13.

IT is popular in our day to decry as superstition that devout instinct which reveres a Christian temple as God's peculiar dwelling-place. Cold-blooded men say, "It is no more than any other mass of bricks and mortar." Poetry, too, has much to say of worshipping God in fields and forests and mountains and valleys, and on the sea. A good deal of watery sentiment has been expended by sabbath-breakers on "Nature's first temple."

The undoubted truth of God's omnipresence is about all the truth there is underneath this popular twaddle. Let us see, then, what reason we have for regarding a place of Christian worship with peculiar reverence.

1. *The biblical history of the idea of a place where*

God is worshipped represents it as one of peculiar and awful sanctity. The development of the conception of "the Lord's house" in the Scriptures is deeply interesting. The most ancient hint of it in any known literature is found in the Book of Job. "Nature's first temple" was as magnificent then as now; yet the afflicted patriarch laments, "Oh that I knew *where* I might find Him, that I might come even to his *seat!*" He longs to fix upon some *spot* where he can find God,—some *place* where the awful distance between him and God shall be lessened. Just because God is everywhere, he seems, to himself, to find him nowhere.

This is human nature. Call it infirmity if you will: still it is human nature. The intuitions of the race have acknowledged it. Groves, mountains, grottoes, caves, streams, valleys, plains, lakes, as well as altars and temples, have been consecrated as the abodes of gods. As we instinctively clothe our conception of God in human form, and seem to hear his voice, dread his eye, see his hand, hear his footfall, so we intuitively assign to him some place which we approach with awe. Is this all falsehood? It is not like God to make the soul of man a liar in its very nature.

"Nature's first temple" was as grand and imposing in Abraham's day as now: yet he went three-days' journey with his costly sacrifice to Mount Moriah; and there, in a definite and becoming *place*, he found and worshipped God. Isaac was

fond of walking in the fields at eventide; but he built an altar at Beersheba, because God there appeared to him, and blessed him. The heavens were resplendent with the constellations of a Syrian sky when Jacob spent a night in the open plain. The ground was his couch, and a stone was his pillow. But he discovered before morning that God was there; and he called the place Beth-el, and said, "How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God; and this is the gate of heaven." Again he spends a solitary night under the open sky, and his dreams are troubled. He seems to be struggling with an august and mysterious stranger till the daybreak. And he calls that place "Peniel;" for, says he, "I have seen God face to face."

Moses is keeping flocks near Mount Horeb, and a bush on fire turns him aside. He thinks it "a great sight," for he discovers that God is there. He hears a voice saying, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." Again, when Moses leads the people out of Egypt, not every man's tent is God's dwelling, but a pillar of cloud and of fire leads the march, and God is in the pillar. Arrived at Sinai, amidst thunder and lightning and tempest and fire, and "a voice of words," God is found high up in the mountain and the cloud. Moses goes up into the thick darkness where God is. There he receives the

pattern of the tabernacle, and that becomes for generations the peculiar mercy-seat of God. The people fear exceedingly, and tremble, and cry out, "Let not God speak with us, lest we die!"

At length the kingdom of Judah reaches its golden age; and the temple rises in far-famed splendor. God says of it, "I have *hallowed* this place, to put my name there forever." The temple of Solomon was the original ideal of a house of God, realized in architecture unrivalled in that age. A whole nation poured out its treasures in the building. The wisest of monarchs tasked the skill of the most ingenious artificers, and the genius of the most accomplished architects of the times. It was the Jewish St. Peter's. Ophir sent its pure gold, and Lebanon its magnificent cedars. Jerusalem and Tyre united their navies as transport ships. "The house of God" must be made "exceeding magnificent, of fame and glory throughout all countries." So hallowed was the place, and so sacred the work, that it must proceed in hushed stillness. Because God was to dwell there, "neither hammer nor axe, nor any tool of iron," must be "heard in the house while it was in building." It must grow in silence, as forests grow.

"No workman's steel nor ponderous axes rung:
Like some tall palm the noiseless fabric sprung."

When finished it was one of the wonders of the world. The reporters of the age could not tell

the half of it. Sheba's queen was abashed as she approached it, and "there was no more spirit in her."

Such is the biblical conception of the sacredness of the house of God. "The holy place; the holy hill; the place where mine honor dwelleth; the gate of heaven:" so the Bible describes in brief its unutterable sanctity.

2. *The Bible represents the building and repairing of the Lord's house as acts of eminent piety.* The historian says of Joash in the context, that he was a godly man as long as he had the guidance of the celebrated priest Jehoiada. Yet the only thing thought worthy of mention in that part of his reign is, that "he was minded to repair the house of the Lord."

It was counted an act of signal devotion in David, that he was minded "to build the house of the Lord." Only the awful sacredness of the work forbade David's doing it, because he had been a man of war. It was incongruous with the divine idea, that a military chief, who had shed much blood, should set his hand to a work so holy. The dignity of a great civilian, and the most highly cultured monarch of the age, was better suited to its hallowed purpose. Of Solomon's long and splendid reign, the erection of the temple was the crowning deed, renowned alike as a token of his wisdom and his piety. The chief object of one entire book of the Bible—the Book of Nehemiah—is to record the building of the second temple.

Passing on to later times, the most significant token of the divine idea of the temple where God dwelt is found in the fact that our Lord accepted it as the symbol of his own sacred body. "He spake of the temple of his body." His resurrection, the crowning event of his sinless life, was a rebuilding of a temple. When the apostles also would express to Christian believers the most exalted conception of their consecrated character in God's sight, the form of the admonition is, "Ye are the temple of God. Whoso defileth the temple of God, him shall God destroy."

3. In perfect keeping with the biblical idea on this subject, *it is the instinct of a devout heart, everywhere and always, to revere the house in which God is publicly worshipped.* Like every other vital principle of religion, it may degenerate into superstition. But it is natural to the spirit of worship. Catholic Christians are right in their reverent regard for their churches and utensils of service. If Protestant Christians have lost the ancient spirit of the Church in this respect, they are none the better for it.

An incident occurred in Boston not long ago, which made me wish that all our churches were open for daily and hourly individual worship. A poor emigrant-woman, with her helpless children, apparently just from the ship in which they had come to a strange land, saw a Protestant church, on the spire of which was the familiar cross. She

thought it a temple of her own faith. But, as its doors were closed, she could not enter; and she devoutly knelt with her children on the pavement, and offered silent prayer. She was a stranger in a strange land. Strange faces and sounds which she could not understand were all around her; but there was one thing which was familiar and dear to her,—the cross, emblematic of our common Redeemer. She could understand that. I seemed to hear her voice as her heart flowed out in grateful prayer for herself and children in the new life which they were beginning, or in thanksgiving for their safety from the perils of the sea. Was that superstition? I could not call it so.

I once sat in the shadow of one of the arches of the Colosseum at Rome, in the autumnal moonlight, and alone. That ruin has long since been consecrated as a place of Christian worship. A cross stands in the centre, around which a crowd of worshippers is often gathered on a Friday, listening to very earnest, and by no means unchristian, preaching. As I sat there trying to picture the scenes of the early martyrdoms which had occurred there, when Christian captives were thrown to wild beasts amidst the ferocious plaudits of a hundred thousand spectators in the galleries above, a solitary peasant came through; and bending under his burden of fagots, and unconscious that any human eye was looking on, he knelt and offered silent prayer before the cross. The cross

was nothing to my Puritan iconoclasm; and the promise on the placard appended to it, of deliverance from I do not know how much time in purgatory to any one who shall imprint a kiss there, saddened me. But I could not judge by my severer faith the impulsive devotion of the poor Italian. I wanted to grasp his hand as that of a Christian brother. He was expressing in his way the same instinct of religious reverence which I felt in looking upon the spot where thousands of Christian martyrs had sealed their fate in blood. Who shall judge between us, and say that my mood was religion, and his superstition?

It may have been an extreme of this instinct which led Dr. Samuel Johnson to lift his hat reverently whenever he passed a church in the streets of London; but better that than the covered head and the laugh and the jest often seen and heard in our churches. That is a becoming, because a perfectly sensible, act of reverence, in which worshippers of the Church of England bow the head in silent prayer at the beginning of public religious service. Our plainer forms of worship would be improved by the usage.

4. *The associations of the Lord's house are an incalculable help to the culture of religious character.* We are creatures of association. We are often moved more profoundly than we think by our surroundings. The recollection of our experiences in the house of God may be among the most

precious treasures that memory hoards. The prayers we have heard there; the old hymns of the fathers, some of them redolent with the incense of a thousand years; the sermons which have moved us; the Scriptures read and expounded; certain texts which were new to us and most timely; the light of the setting sun streaming in at western windows when it seemed like the glory of God's countenance; the seat where the mother sat holding fast our childish hand, or the corner from which the father turned his loving eye upon us in mild reproof; the pews from which sainted men and women have gone to their rest,—oh, there are holy forces in such reminiscences! They are "golden vials full of odors." They come back to us in after-years, "trailing clouds of glory." They make the very walls of the house of God eloquent. The stone cries out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber answers it. The very silence of the place on a week-day is more potent than angels' voices. O thou homely "meeting-house" of my youth, God bless thee! If I forget thee, let my right hand forget her cunning; if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!

An eminent statesman of our country, whose funeral was attended by reverent thousands, once boasted flippantly that he "had not seen the inside of a church in twelve years." Well, he had sought other things, and he had his reward. But his

character, through his long public career, showed the want of just those qualities which devout attendance on the services of religion would have tended to develop. He was irreverent, uncharitable, selfish, intemperate in speech, one-sided in policy, a man of few friends, whom all men feared but few could love. And, so far as men could see, — God knows how truthfully, — he died as the fool dieth. Not one word of Christian consolation relieved his last agonies. He uttered not one word which could indicate whether he believed in God or not, whether he had a soul or not, whether he thought of or cared for the world to which he was going. An educated Greek who had never heard of the New Testament might have died as calmly and as rationally. Socrates died *more* rationally. Many a savage in our Western wilds has died chanting his tribal death-song, with more evidence of fitness to meet the Great Spirit than that man over whose bier thousands went through the forms of magnificent mourning. "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

5. *A Christian church is the most significant emblem we have of heaven.* "This is the *gate* of heaven," said the astonished patriarch. He had seen angels. Heaven seemed very near to him.

There was reason in the simple faith of our fathers, which interpreted these words so literally that they longed to build their tombs underneath

the churches where they and their fathers worshipped, or in the cheerful "God's acre" around them. They wanted to be close at hand when the morning dawned.

It was one of the strange omissions which attracted the wonder of St. John in the New Jerusalem, that he saw no temple there. But he adds as a reason, ample in his view, that the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. Let us not lift irreverently the veil from these words; yet they must mean so much as this,—that in some mysterious way the ineffable Godhead will do for us there what the material temples of our worship do here. These are the antechamber to that awful yet precious Presence.

It is an inspiring thought also, that the most intelligible conception the Scriptures give us of the occupations of the heavenly life is that of churchly song. The service of song is the one grand hint which our embodied spirits can comprehend of what heaven is, and what we are to do there. Active as we doubtless shall be beyond all conceptions of our tired faculties here; migrating, it may be, in chariots of eager thought, to distant and invisible portions of the universe,—yet all that we do shall be done in the spirit of such ecstatic gladness, that we shall live in a *state* of holy and triumphant song. Melody shall express, more than any other one idea, our doing and our being.

For one, I cannot rid myself of the hope, too,

that we shall sometimes — perhaps on great anniversaries commemorative of earthly histories — literally sing the very psalms and hymns which are so often the “gate of heaven” to us here. It would be sadder parting with this world than we hope it will be when our time comes, if we must forget these ancient lyrics, or find our tongues dumb when we would utter them. How can we live without them? Are they not a part of our very being? Take them away, with all the experiences of which they are the symbol, and what would there be left of us to carry into heaven?

Some lines, at least, of the hymn “Rock of ages, cleft for me,” and “My faith looks up to thee,” and “Not all the blood of beasts,” and “Nearer, my God, to thee,” and “Just as I am, without one plea,” — must we part with them? It would be like parting with the recognition of friends in heaven.

What disembodied life, if there is such a thing, may be, I do not know. To my earth-bound thought it is what I imagine the gorgeous pinions and sportive flights of the butterfly are to the caterpillar. But one thing I hope and pray for: Of old friends, and old scriptures, and old hymns, and old litanies, and old churches where the fathers worshipped their God and mine, **Lord,** keep my memory green forever!