

God's Great Building Work

- 1 Lord, Thou art a potter skilled
And a glorious builder too,
Molding for Thy vessel great,
Building with Thy house in view.
I am both a man of clay
And a new-made living stone,
That Thy vessel I may be
And the temple Thou wouldst own.
- 2 Though of clay Thou madest us,
Thou wouldst have us be transformed;
With Thy life as purest gold,
Unto precious stones conformed.
We shall, through Thy building work,
Then become Thy loving Bride,
In one Body joined to Thee,
That Thy heart be satisfied.
- 3 What Thy heart desires and loves
Are not precious stones alone,
But together these to build
For Thy glory, for Thy home.
Thou, the all-inclusive Christ,
Dost a builded Church require,
That Thy glorious riches may
Radiate their light entire.
- 4 Not the person spiritual
In an individual way,
But the corporate life expressed
Will Thy heart's desire display.
Members separate and detached
Ne'er express Thee perfectly,
But Thy Body tempered, built,
Ever shall Thy fulness be.
- 5 Build me, Lord, with other saints,
Independence ne'er allow,
But according to Thy plan
Fitly frame and join me now.
In experience not my boast,
Nor in gifts would be my pride;
For Thy building I give all,
That Thou may be glorified. (*Hymns*, #839)

The above hymn, written by Witness Lee, is a tribute to the God who builds, and the writer echoes a consecration and desire to build together with Him. God's building is clearly portrayed in both the Old and the New Testaments as the center and the goal of God in His move on

the earth. His desire is to have an eternal counterpart—His Body and bride. He also seeks a dwelling place among and within created and redeemed humanity. His intention from eternity has been to gain an expression of Himself in His chosen, redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified people. God's building work is according to this eternal plan and purpose. In spite of the Bible's strong, rich, and pure revelation of God's desire and intention, it is rare to find Christian writings that express this distinct burden in God's heart. This hymn is a prayer, an exchange between two hearts—the heart of God and the heart of His redeemed. It exalts God for His building work, and at the same time, it responds to God's desire by praying with a view to fulfilling His intention to have such a dwelling place and bride built up on earth.

A Brief Review of Building in the Scriptures

In Genesis 28 Jacob's dream of the house of God as the place where earth is joined to heaven and heaven to earth opens the matter of God's universal goal. When the Lord Jesus introduced Himself to Nathanael in John 1, He referred to Jacob's dream to show that He is the great ladder that joins earth to heaven (v. 51). The history of the children of Israel in the Old Testament also unveils God's building work; the focal point in His leading His chosen people, Israel, was the tabernacle and the temple. God called the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob out of Egypt to return to the land that He had promised to Abraham and to his seed. Before they were brought into the good land, however, God gave them a detailed pattern for the building of the tabernacle that would be the place of God's dwelling among them. The book of Exodus ends with the tabernacle being completed and God's glory filling the tabernacle (40:33-34). When the kingdom was established under David and Solomon, the building of the temple was the central factor in the hearts of the people. After the building of the temple was completed, Solomon dedicated it to Jehovah, and the glory of Jehovah filled the temple (1 Kings 8:1-11).

These two physical entities stand out as outward expressions of God's dwelling place among men, but God's heart's desire is to dwell within man himself, as Isaiah echoes, saying,

Heaven is My throne, / And the earth the footstool for

My feet. / Where then is the house that you will build for Me, / And where is the place of My rest? / For all these things My hand has made, / And so all these things have come into being, declares Jehovah. / But to this kind of man will I look, to him who is poor / And of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word. (66:1-2)

In the New Testament the Lord Jesus, the Word of God, became flesh and dwelt as the tabernacle of God with man (John 1:14). The New Testament introduces the view that God's intention in reality, as opposed to in type, is to establish an organic dwelling place on the earth in the person of His incarnated Son. Following the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the Epistles and eventually the book of Revelation confirm God's goal to have a dwelling place, a living house constituted with God and His people.

God's Great Skill and His Building

The hymn above is written according to the revelation of God's eternal purpose to build Himself into redeemed humanity, to build redeemed humanity into Himself, and to build redeemed humanity together into Himself to produce a great organic reproduction of Himself. Stanza 1 of the hymn begins with worship to God in relation to His twofold skills—as a Potter to mold humanity as a clay vessel to contain Him and as a Builder to build redeemed humanity as His temple to be His possession.

Humanity was created of the dust of the ground and formed in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 2:7; 1:26). Because God is Spirit, God's image and likeness in humanity should be a matter of attributes and expression; humanity matches God in terms of attributes, and humanity expresses God in virtues that reflect His attributes. In His most prominent attributes, God is revealed in the Bible to be love, light, righteousness, and holiness. The God-created virtues of humanity match and express these same qualities. Humanity is much more than a higher form of animal. Yes, he is a creature created by God, but in His creation of humanity, God deviated from His pattern employed in the previous steps of creation—He did not simply say, "Let the earth bring forth..." as He had with the animals, and He did not say, "According to their kind." Rather, He said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." Thus, humanity was not made according to its own kind; it was made according to God's kind! Humanity was created as a container, a vessel, to receive God, contain God, and express God. The New Testament confirms that God's purpose is to fill humanity (first Jesus Christ and then His believers) with the expression of His glory:

Because the God who said, Out of darkness light shall shine, is the One who shined in our hearts to illuminate

the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not out of us. (2 Cor. 4:6-7)

The hymn continues, "I am both a man of clay / And a new-made living stone, / That Thy vessel I may be / And the temple Thou wouldst own." The clay vessel is transformed to living stone! This dynamic event has revolutionized the believers. As a living stone, a believer is constituted to be a living part of a living building, God's temple. The reference to the living stones in the hymn is no doubt based on Peter's words in his first Epistle: "Coming to Him, a living stone, rejected by men but with God chosen and precious, you yourselves also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:4-5). However, in this stanza of the hymn, the emphasis is not yet on the corporate building up of a spiritual house. Rather, the temple is related to the personal experience of each individual believer—I *am* indicates that the reference to the temple as God's possession refers to the sanctified body of each believer, matching Paul's admonition to the believers in Corinth:

He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin which a man may do is outside the body, but he who commits fornication sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price. So then glorify God in your body. (1 Cor. 6:17-20)

The hymn declares, "And the temple Thou wouldst own." The Lord Jesus as the Spirit has entered into every believer. Hence, as redeemed persons, we should be conscious of the fact that He has mingled Himself with our human spirit so that two spirits—the Spirit of the Lord and our spirit—have become one spirit. Now the Lord as the Spirit dwells in our spirit within our body as His temple. The Lord has purchased us with His precious blood and taken up His residence in our body. He has made us His holy temple. He owns us as His treasured and precious dwelling, a sanctified place.

The Process of God's Building

Stanza 2 provides details concerning the process by which a clay vessel becomes a living stone: "Though of clay Thou madest us, / Thou wouldst have us be transformed; / With Thy life as purest gold, / Unto precious stones conformed." God's way to constitute His vessels as living stones is through regeneration and transformation. Having been regenerated, we need to be transformed into the same image of Christ. Second Corinthians 3:18 gives

us more understanding of this glorious fact: “We all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit.” Our life should be a constant beholding of our wonderful Lord, and as we behold, consider, pray to and with, and participate in the life of this wonderful person, we are in the process of being transformed from one degree of glory to the next, becoming the same as He is in life, nature, and function. This is accomplished by the operation of the Lord Spirit in our spirit. The transformation of our soul must become our highest aspiration, but transformation cannot be achieved through our efforts. It can be realized only by the living Spirit moving from our spirit into our mind, emotion, and will. Practically speaking, the most effective way for us to behold Him is to spend time with Him in His Word, the Bible. In John 6:57 the Lord told His disciples that the unique way to have life and live is to eat of Him. When He was questioned about such a difficult saying, He told His disciples in verse 63 that the Spirit is the unique One who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. Then He revealed that the words He spoke were spirit and life (v. 63). When we consider these two portions together, we apprehend that we can eat the Lord by taking in His Word. The most effectual way to practice eating the Lord is by praying over and praying with the words of the Bible. If we daily practice spending time to take in the Scriptures in this practical way, we will be ushered into a daily life of transformation.

The Goal of God’s Building Work

The second half of stanza 2 focuses on the goal of God’s building work: “We shall, through Thy building work, / Then become Thy loving Bride, / In one Body joined to Thee, / That Thy heart be satisfied.” In stanza 1 the focus is centered on “I am...”; in stanza 2 it changes to “we shall” because the goal of God’s building work is the church, the corporate Body of Christ. The church is the Body of Christ. Every newborn believer is a member of this Body.

The hymn also says that through the building work of the Lord we become His loving bride: “In one Body joined to Thee.” The bride of Christ is the Body built up in love. Day by day He is nourishing and cherishing the bride as His corporate Body, the church:

Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her that He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of the water in the word, that He might present the church to Himself glorious, not having spot or wrinkle or any such things, but that she would be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27)

This is a matter of love. We need to cultivate our personal

relationship with the Lord in love—loving Him in our personal fellowship with Him and loving Him with one another in our daily church life.

The Body Dealing with Individualism

Stanza 3 continues the thought from stanza 2: “What Thy heart desires and loves / Are not precious stones alone, / But together these to build / For Thy glory, for Thy home.” Building is in the heart of the Lord because, as stanza 4 declares, “Members separate and detached / Ne’er express Thee perfectly, / But Thy Body tempered, built, / Ever shall Thy fulness be.” Although every regenerated believer in Christ is a member of the Body of Christ, not every member is built into the Body, and not every member is building up the Body. We all should take seriously the matter of presenting ourselves to be perfected for the building up of the Body. As an adjunct to our being perfected, we all need to grow up into the Head, Christ, in all things; then out from Him, all the members will function according to their measure. In this way the Body will build itself up in love (Eph. 4:15-16; Rom. 12:4-5).

Regrettably, among the majority of Christians today, there are very few who respond to the deep longing in the heart of the Lord for the building of His church. The thought of functioning in the Body for its building up is foreign to the concepts of nearly all. The Lord has equipped us with the capacity to build up His Body, but we often “bury our talents,” as indicated in the parable that the Lord spoke to His disciples in Matthew 25:14-30.

As a part of the building up of the Body and its development into a dwelling place of God in spirit, stanza 4 of the hymn speaks of the Body being tempered, or blended, together, which is a reference to 1 Corinthians 12:24-25: “Our comely members have no need. But God has blended the body together, giving more abundant honor to the member that lacked, that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same care for one another.” The word translated “blended” is the Greek word, *sugkerannumi*. In the Greek dictionary of Strong’s *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, this word is defined as “to commingle, i.e. (fig.) to combine or assimilate:—mix with, temper together” (67). The blending, or tempering, of the Body is a major factor in the building. Without blending, there can be no building. Witness Lee released a succinct fellowship concerning blending, in a book entitled *The Divine and Mystical Realm*:

God has blended the Body together (1 Cor. 12:24). The word *blended* also means adjusted, harmonized, tempered, and mingled. God has blended the Body, adjusted the Body, harmonized the Body, tempered the Body, and

mingled the Body. The Greek word for *blended* implies the losing of distinctions. One brother's distinction may be quickness, and another's may be slowness. But in the Body life the slowness disappears and the quickness is taken away. All such distinctions are gone. God has blended all the believers of all different races and colors. Who can make the blacks and the whites lose their distinctions? Only God can do this. A husband and a wife can have the harmony in their marriage life only by losing their distinctions.

In order to be harmonized, blended, adjusted, mingled, and tempered in the Body life, we have to go through the cross and be by the Spirit, dispensing Christ to others for the sake of the Body of Christ. The [serving ones] must learn to be crossed out. Whatever we do should be by the Spirit to dispense Christ. Also, what we do should not be for our interest and according to our taste but for the church. As long as we practice these points, we will have the blending.

All of these points mean that we should fellowship...Fellowship tempers us; fellowship adjusts us; fellowship harmonizes us; and fellowship mingles us. We should forget about whether we are slow or quick and just fellowship with others. We should not do anything without fellowshiping with the other saints who are coordinating with us. Fellowship requires us to stop when we are about to do something. In our coordination in the church life, in the Lord's work, we all have to learn not to do anything without fellowship. (86-87)

The concluding stanza of the hymn is a prayerful commitment to the building, asking the Lord to build us into His building by fitly framing us and joining us together as one Body: "Build me, Lord, with other saints, / Independence ne'er allow, / But according to Thy plan / Fitly frame and join me now." Being built into the Body of Christ is a process requiring the Lord's application of His sovereign hand to apply the cross to deal with independence and to fitly frame and join the believers together. The building up of the Body involves a constant flow of the life from the Head through the members of the Body who are holding to and growing up into Him as the source. Wuest in his *Word Studies from the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* comments on Ephesians 4:15-16:

The entire Body composed of the individual saints, constantly being more closely joined together and constantly growing together into an organic union through the life of the Head flowing through the bands of supply that join its members together, does so "according to the measure of every part." (105)

The fitly framing of the members into the Body and their being joined together as members of one another depend

on the operation of the Lord as the life-giving Spirit in our spirit. Although the energizing Spirit flows as life from the Head into the Body for the organic building up, the decisive factor of the practical effectiveness of the process is the action of each of us as a channel for this flow. To whatever degree we cultivate a living, daily contact with the Lord and with the fellow members of the Body, the Body will experience the organic building up from the Head. We each must present ourselves to the Lord, not once for all but day by day, even moment by moment, to receive the supply from the Head so that the divine life may flow through each one of us to the Body for its building up in love.

Each stanza ends with a prayerful concern for the desire in God's heart and the relationship of the believer to God's longing. The first stanza expresses the result of God's building work as a vessel to contain the Lord and a temple for His dwelling. The second stanza presents a loving bride and a Body fully joined to and one with the Lord for the satisfaction of His heart. The third stanza articulates the effectiveness of a "builded Church" to display and radiate the light of the glorious riches of Christ. The fourth stanza concludes that the Body of Christ will become the reality of the fullness of Christ as it is tempered and built up. The final stanza is the determination of a consecrated believer to give all that he is and has for the building, with the expectation that the Lord would be glorified.

May the singers and readers of this hymn stop and take a few precious moments to prayerfully muse over what has motivated and energized our God and Savior in His creation of humanity and in the carrying out of His redemption and full salvation. Redeemed humanity is God's dwelling place and rest, His Body and bride for His full satisfaction, and His expression through the radiant display of His glorious riches in His built-up Body, His fullness in the church, His Body; and His glorification through His consecrated members who have given themselves absolutely for His building. May we learn to pray, believe, and function together with Him—"For Thy building I give all. / That Thou may be glorified."

by Gary Kaiser

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