

**“And I Will Fill This House with Splendor”
II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Haggai 2:1-9**

II Thessalonians 2:1-3, 13-17

¹As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ
and our being gathered together to him,

we beg you, brothers and sisters,

²not to be quickly shaken in mind, or alarmed,
either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us,
to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.

³Let no one deceive you in any way;
for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first
and the lawless one is revealed,
the one destined for destruction.

¹³But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters
beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for
salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the
truth.

¹⁴For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good
news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁵So then, siblings in Christ, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions
that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who
loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good
hope, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and
word.

Historical Introduction

The Covenant People in Jerusalem had suffered total defeat and had lived through decades of their best and brightest having been exiled, during which time, it was always on their minds and in their hearts that the Jerusalem Temple, which was God’s house and the center of the Covenant People’s world, had been sacked, and then desecrated, and finally razed to the ground by the Babylonians.

But then, after most of a human lifetime, Cyrus the Persian had defeated the Babylonians, and had given permission for all the Jews to come back home and rebuild the Temple—even those who were born in exile, who had known Jerusalem was home even though they’d never been there.

Cyrus died around 529 BCE, but a few years later, King Darius I of Persia reiterated the go-ahead for the Jews to rebuild the Temple.

Sometimes even when a green light is given, everybody still kind of looks around and waits for somebody to tell them what to do, or maybe just to say the word “Go.”

So God spoke through the prophet Haggai,
 and called the remnant people’s governor,
 and the remnant people’s high priest,
 and the remnant people themselves, and said,

“You have all built your own houses; now let’s undertake the work of rebuilding God’s house” (Haggai 1).

And the people came out and did the work, and put in some money, and built a building for God’s house.

And then God called Haggai into service again.

Haggai 2:1-9

²In the second year of King Darius,
 in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month,

the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying:

²Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah,
and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest,
and to the remnant of the people, and say,

³Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How
does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?

⁴Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD;
take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest;
take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD;

Work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, ⁵according to the
promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt.

My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

⁶For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will
shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; ⁷and I will
shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come,

and I will fill this house with splendor,
says the LORD of hosts.

⁸The silver is mine, and the gold is mine,
says the LORD of hosts.

⁹The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former,
says the LORD of hosts;
and in this place I will give prosperity,
says the LORD of hosts.

The Sermon

“And I will fill this house with splendor,

And this latter splendor will be greater than the former,

and in this place I will give prosperity,” says the LORD of hosts—although the word translated “prosperity” is actually *shalom*:

The latter splendor, or glory, of this house shall be greater than the former, and in this place I will give *shalom*—wholeness, unity, integrity, peace.

What gives splendor to a house? What brings splendor to your house?

What brings glory to God’s house? I suppose for us to be able to think about that, we need to consider: what is God’s house now?

What would it mean for God to give deep, all-encompassing peace to the place where you live when you’re in God’s house, or when God is in your house?

There is an episode from this moment in the history of the Covenant People of Israel that I probably reread and reconsider at least annually, like the Christmas story or the Empty Tomb or Thomas and the disciples.

I had read it before, but it was meaningfully brought to my attention for good by a Presbyterian clergy colleague back when I was a much younger minister and serving on a committee of the presbytery I was in.

I have since forgotten his name and he probably never knew mine, though for a while I noticed his name coming up in national conversations wherein he was staking out territory that I didn’t always agree with.

The reason I am telling you all of this, about another minister with whom I otherwise had little in common, and from whom I often came to opposing conclusions, whose name I don’t know and who probably

doesn't know mine, who gracefully and inspiringly introduced me to a Bible story I had read but never absorbed—

the reason I'm saying all of that is that somehow, for the episode in question, in a time when good, intelligent, faithful people sometimes seem to think in and speak from entirely different universes, all of that somehow seems perfect.

The story is told in Ezra 3.

Decades after the crushing defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonians, back in Jerusalem, we find Ezra saying, "Our long national nightmare is over," and the prophet Haggai is urging Governor Zerubbabel and High Priest Joshua to get moving on rebuilding the Temple. God has seen fit for the people to return and to restore what needs to be restored.

The Jews who returned to Jerusalem met up with those who had stayed; together, they started to rebuild the Temple, on the same site as the first.

And Ezra 3 says:

"When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets...And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

"But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping."

When I was 22 and had just started a year in England as a Mission Volunteer, a couple from the church I was serving took me one evening to the rural village where they had both grown up, a quintessentially English countryside hamlet called Turvey, home to an abbey and a thousand year old church and of course a couple of pubs.

They specifically wanted to take me to dinner in one of those pubs, the Three Fyshes, which was built in 1487 but had only begun serving refreshments more recently, in 1624.

As we drove into the English countryside, and came to the village, and found the Three Fyshes, and went inside, it was everything I had dreamed of in a childhood of nursery rhymes and a boyhood reading Tolkien books and an adolescence of Jethro Tull record covers. I felt like I had fallen into a Canterbury Tale or a Shakespeare play or an episode of Masterpiece Theatre.

It was transcendent, entrancing, and for this hitherto unrequited Anglophile, beyond my wildest dreams.

When I had more or less caught my breath, I looked at my companions, and they were going, “Hm.”

They were seeing it from an entirely different perspective. Where I saw how much character was there, they were seeing how much wasn't. They were appalled at what they saw as modernization and an evident lack of self-awareness on the part of the current proprietors. They were literally embarrassed, fearing they had brought me out to just another restaurant.

They were lovely hosts—I still see them with great gladness whenever I get back there—and they spent the rest of the evening trying not to look too crestfallen. But they were practically heartbroken.

It wasn't just about dinner. They had wanted to bring me into their country, into the timeless place of their childhoods; they had wanted me to be enveloped in the surroundings that made them who they are, a place that gave them meaning and an anchor in the world.

I thought then and still think today: they needn't have worried; I was absolutely enchanted. But I can tell you that in two minutes of research to be sure I had my facts right about the Three Fyshes, I went online and found its website, and looking at what seems to have become a more than adequate but more or less charmless, modern restaurant, I thought, "Wendy and Jeremy, I get it."

Haggai had urged the people and their governmental and religious leaders to get to work and rebuild the building of the house of God. And some had chipped in, and some had built, and it started to take shape.

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the original house, wept loudly, while others shouted for joy, and in the crowd, you couldn't distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of weeping.

And Haggai held a town hall meeting of the people, and asked for a show of hands:

Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory?

How does it look to you now?

Is it not in your sight as nothing?

Yet now take courage, governor, says the LORD; take courage, high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD:

“*Work on it, for I am with you,*” says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you—literally, “the word that I covenanted with you”—when you came out of Egypt.

My spirit lives among you. Don’t be afraid. Build this house. Because I will fill this house with glory.

The latter splendor of this house will be greater than the former, and in this place I will give true peace—*shalom*.

It used to be that the Jerusalem Temple was thought of as God’s house. You could find peace there in knowing you had made the pilgrimage, and by making the right sacrifices when you got there.

It used to be, and still is for a lot of people, that the local church building was thought of as God’s house. You could find peace there by attending weekly services and Sunday School and midweek programming. Relationships that last beyond a lifetime were formed there. Discipleship was learned there in that specific building.

The communion table.

The pulpit.

The pews.

The carpet.

The parlor.

The choir loft.

The coffee table.

The fellowship hall.

The Sunday School classroom.

The stained glass windows.

The baptismal font.

The meeting room.

The front door.

The play area.

The custodial closet.

The vestibule.
 The kitchen.
 The nursery.
 The yard.
 The church sign.

I was reading something the other day about “sacred space” in the context of church building architecture. “Theologically,” the writer said, “we understand that the church transcends the building and is about the people rather than a series of rooms, doors, or the steeple.”ⁱ

I thought, yes, it’s more about the people than our buildings, but if it’s called *theology* but it’s really about the *people*, that sounds a bit like we just declared ourselves to be God. But then the writer finished his thought by saying, “the power of sacred space to enrich, embolden, and embody the Christian faith has held for centuries,”ⁱⁱ which is true, although it still sounded like it’s all about us and our faith, and not about God and God’s faithfulness to us.

But then he quoted Winston Churchill who said: “We shape our buildings and thereafter our buildings shape us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We build the house, but God gives it its glory, and through it, God brings *shalom*.

What gives splendor to a house? What brings splendor to your house?

What brings glory to God’s house?

What would it mean for God to give all-encompassing peace to the place where you live when you’re in God’s house, or when God is in your house?

Or maybe that question is better stated: Where do you feel like you’re in God’s house?

Outside? In the natural environment?

In monastic houses—an ancient abbey or an out-of-the-way monastery?

Or when you are among and in every sense *with* people who are impoverished; with victimized and oppressed people; people with mental, physical or emotional illnesses; forgotten people; despised and misunderstood people?

Where, or when or in what circumstances, do you most feel like you are in the house of God?

Build that house—work on that house, said Haggai. Build that house with good works and good words.

God made a covenant with us when God brought us out of slavery—the *house* of bondage.

And that covenant still holds, all these generations, all these millennia later: God's spirit "abides" among us, *has taken up permanent residence*—receives mail and pays bills—among us. You don't have to be afraid. Keep working on that house.

Paul or one of his companions or somebody else wrote a reminder in Second Thessalonians to the people in only the first or second generation of the very young Church: ***God chose you*** as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

For this purpose, *God* called *you* through the proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So stand firm and hold fast to the traditions you were taught.

And may Jesus himself, and the God of your ancestors, who loved us and has given us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Do whatever it is that builds God's house. Because God will give that house greater glory than we have yet imagined.

Jesus has lived and died and lives again, for you.

What gives splendor to a house? What brings splendor to your house?

What brings glory to God's house?

And what would it mean for God to bring all-encompassing peace to the place where you live when you're in God's house, or when God is in your house?

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ⁱ Joshua Taylor, "The Place of Our Faith: Restoration and Renovation in Sacred Space," in *Call to Worship* (53:2, 2019), 17

ⁱⁱ Taylor, "The Place of Our Faith," 17

ⁱⁱⁱ Taylor delivering a quote from "Churchill and the Commons Chamber" at <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/architecture/palacestructure/churchill/>