

WHO'LL STOP THE RAIN?

11th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 2:20-22

A few weeks ago Laurie and I were eating dinner at a restaurant when I noticed the song that was playing in the background. They had been playing some oldies, and the one that caught my attention was *Who'll Stop the Rain*, by Creedence Clearwater Revival. Many years ago they were one of my favorite groups with classic hits like *Proud Mary*, *Bad Moon Rising*, *Looking Out My Back Door*, and *Born On the Bayou*. Young or old, even if you don't think you're familiar with the song we were hearing, if you hear it you'll say, "Oh yeah, I know this one."

After all the rain we have had these past few months, I could understand why Creedence might ask who will stop the rain. I've had enough myself. But later that evening the song kept rattling around in my brain and that caused me to think about the message. Oddly, though I've heard it many times I had never really given much thought to what it was saying. Did John Fogerty, who wrote the song, live in Seattle? Was this a plea after months of damp, gloomy days, for a break and some sunshine? I suspected that wasn't the case. And it is not. The song has a somewhat melancholy message. It opens with the words, "Long as I remember, the rain been comin' down. Clouds of mystery fallin', confusion on the ground. Good men through the ages, tryin' to find the sun, and I wonder, still I wonder, who'll stop the rain." The second verse says, "Five year plans and new deals, wrapped in golden chains, and I wonder, still I wonder, who'll stop the rain." The last verse says, "The crowd had rushed together, trying to keep warm. Still the rain kept falling, and I wonder, still I wonder, who'll stop the rain."

What in the world is this about? It turns out that the last verse was inspired by what Fogerty experienced when he went to Woodstock. He was at that music festival when it started raining, and the hedonists and the hippies so prevalent there threw their clothes off and danced in the rain. But it just kept falling and they got wet and cold. It wasn't much fun anymore. The rain falling on that event became a metaphor for Fogerty. Something is dampening all the fun, ruining things, and no matter what we humans do the rain keeps falling. In the song, then, the rain falling is the picture of things going wrong in the human race. The first verse says good men through the ages have been trying to solve the problems of the human race. But no matter what they do, the rain keeps falling, producing confusion on the ground. The politicians come along with their "Five year plans and new deals," and still the rain falls, because none of their plans seem to help. Then came the Woodstock generation, promising peace and new freedom, but the rain kept falling. Who'll stop the rain (because the promises of that generation proved empty)? The song is a somewhat hopeless comment that nothing seems to help, the problems go on no matter what human beings try to do. Fogerty had reason to wonder if the rain could ever be stopped. His own band eventually broke up with a lot of hurt feelings, including tension with his own brother, and those wounds have never really healed. The rain fell on his own relationships, and he couldn't stop it.

Ephesians 2 begins by telling us what causes the rain to keep falling. It is that all of us are spiritually dead. The heart of the problem is spiritual, and no amount of five year plans, new deals

or new age promises of peace and freedom can solve it. There is a solution according to Paul. He says there is something that can stop the rain. It has something to do with what this group right here is all about. We'll see that in Ephesians 2:20-22.

WE ARE A BUILDING

Verses 20-21 says to believers in Jesus, we are “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” So believers in Jesus form a building.

Throughout my years of ministry I have made a point to remind people that the church is not the building it meets in. This has not been as much of a concern in the last few years because our church doesn't own a building. But for many years before that I served in a church that did have a physical facility. People often referred to it as the church. But that building was never the church. No physical building can be a church. All we need to do is ask, “if the building somehow ceased to exist, would the church no longer exist?” The answer is no. The church would go on even if the building burned down. The church is people and the people would continue to be a body even if the building was gone. Conversely, if a church building exists, but there are no people is it actually a church? The answer is no. In fact, there is a building in Cardiff that once was a church. The building still stands, but now it is an office building. So it is clear that the church is people, not a building.

But then we run into this passage where Paul says we, the church, are a building. That sounds confusing. But he is using an illustration. This is a metaphor. He is saying that we are like a building. We are like a building for instance, in the sense that we, though many individually, make one thing. There are a lot of different parts, but the building is one thing. And the building is actually much more than merely the sum of its parts. Consider our house. It has a concrete foundation and slab. It has walls framed with wood, covered with waterproof paper and stucco. It has interior walls made of wallboard. It has windows and doors. It has electrical wiring and panels. It has pipes carrying water in it. It has concrete roof tiles. But all those pieces form one house.

If you have a piece of wood from the frame, it is somewhat useful. Same with a tile from the roof, or a piece of pipe from the plumbing system. But when you put them all together it makes for an amazing place that shelters us from the cold and rain in the winter and from the blazing sun in the summer. It provides us with running water and with electricity so we can have light at night and run our computer to do work. It becomes a refuge, a place of love and family and fellowship. None of that would ever happen by having only the separate pieces of the house. They had to come together to make one thing for that to happen.

In these verses, notice the verbs. We are “built” in verse 20, in verse 21 we are “joined together” and in verse 22 we are “being built together.” Remember your grammar. Verbs have tense, like past, present, future; they have number, singular or plural; they have person, first person, second person, third person; and they have voice: they can be active or passive. Notice the verbs in these verses are mostly passive voice. We are not doing the building; we're being built. We aren't joining; we are being joined together. So who is doing the active work? It is God. God is building

the building. He is the one joining us together. And that makes sense. Buildings don't build themselves.

Before Michael and Carissa bought the house they have now, they looked seriously at some new homes being constructed in Carlsbad. We went to look at the model homes on a number of occasions. We studied the floor plans the builders handed out. At one point Laurie and I went to the lot on which the home that they might buy would be built. There was nothing there but a patch of dirt. I noticed on another lot they had the footings in place, and sitting on the lot was wood they would use for the framing. Even though it was the middle of the day the wood was just sitting there. It wasn't cutting itself to the right lengths and hammering itself into the proper places. That's because it doesn't have the ability to do that. For the raw materials to become a house there had to be a builder. The builder had to first envision and plan the house, then had to arrange to have trenches dug, footings poured, a slab poured, carpenters had to frame the house, plumbers had to put the piping in, electricians had to install wiring. The builders built the house, and the raw materials just allowed them to do what they do.

Who is the builder of the church? It's not me. It's not you. It's not any human being. God is the one who builds the church. I like the picture of the verb in verse 21 where it says we are being joined together. The Greek verb used there was sometimes used of laying a mosaic. Last year Michael and Carissa did some work in the kitchen of their new home to make it what they wanted. Part of that involved putting in a new tile back splash. It is beautiful. But for a couple of days they needed me to stay in their house while the craftsman put that tile in. I thought it was interesting that though his specialty was putting in tile, his name was Mason. But he doesn't do masonry. He does tile. I thought he should change his last name to Tiler. While I was there I talked to him about his craft. He loved talking about it. He explained to me what some of the challenges were, and showed me what he had to do to solve them. He was meticulous in putting the tiles in just right so they looked beautiful and fit together just the way he wanted. As I watched him fit the tiles together I thought of this verse. God is the one who envisions what the building should look like. He selects the tiles and he chooses just the right place for each one.

One of the tendencies in the church is for people to think that we are the ones who build the building. We have the vision and the plan, and it is human ability that makes the building become what we want. This idea has a long history. The Corinthians fell into that trap. They got focused on which leader was the best, in their opinion. Which one was the most dynamic and could most build the church? This led to dissension and division in the church. In 1 Corinthians 3:4 Paul wrote, "When one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere human beings?" In other words, you're doing just what everyone else does and you are thinking the way they think. You are not thinking God's way.

Paul wrote in verses 5-7, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe, as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos

watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, ***but only God, who makes things grow.*** We are the raw materials; God is the builder.

The metaphor is different. It is a garden instead of a building, but the message is the same. It is God who causes the growth, not people. In the case of a plant that is apparent to us. Right now we have a lemon tree, an orange tree, a tangerine tree and a peach tree in our back yard. We love the idea of growing our own fruit. The lemon tree is a rip roaring success. Everything else, not so much. But years ago we thought it would be terrific to grow our own avocados. We planted an avocado tree. We did everything we could think of to make that thing flourish. But we found out what Paul said is true. God causes the growth. We can do many things to try to encourage it, but at the end of the day, if God doesn't make it grow, it's not growing. Our avocado tree gradually, but inexorably withered until it became an avocado *stick*. We watched it die a slow and painful death. It is not people that build this building that God is creating, any more than it is people who make plants grow. It is God who builds the building. He envisions it, plans it, and puts it together, piece by piece.

This is important for us to grasp for a couple of reasons. Since God is the one who is putting pieces together, this means he has made us, shaped us, and placed us in his plan. We are just what he wants us to be, so all we need to do is be whoever he has made us to be, to the best of our ability. We don't choose. We don't say, "I think I'd like to be a stud in this building, because being a stud sounds... well... studly." We would have a real problem at our house if a section of wallboard said, "Hey, being wallboard is boring. No one notices wallboard. I want to be a window. If I were a window people would love me, because people love to look at windows." Windows are nice, but would you want a house made totally of windows? I'm pretty sure you'd not be very happy with that idea when you're taking a shower. God does not need us all to be windows or studs or anything else. He needs us to be who we are and to fill the role he has designed for us in his blueprint, whatever it may be.

There is another implication for us corporately. The problem we have is that if we were the builders of this divine building, it would be something we envisioned and something we make. Because of that it would never be able to be what God needs for it to be. As we will see shortly, this building is supposed to communicate something about God. And if it is a human creation, it inevitably will fail in that endeavor. It will never be able to capture the grandeur, the majesty of God. In fact, it will surely communicate things about him that are skewed, distorted, and just plain not true.

THE BUILDING IS A TEMPLE

What kind of building are we? We aren't a house. We aren't a skyscraping office building. We aren't a school. We aren't a hospital. We aren't a clubhouse. People sometimes think this divine building is one of those things. It's where all of us in the club meet to socialize. Or it is a place where mostly we educate people. Or we conduct religious business here. You'd better give your money or the business won't succeed. Or it's a hospital, where we treat sick people and help them get better. Or maybe it's just where I feel at home.

There is some element of truth in all of those, except for the business idea. Hopefully we all should feel at home here, feel like we belong here. We do socialize here and enjoy each other. We do teach people, so there is an education element. We do welcome sick souls here and hope to bring them healing. But none of those is the primary focus of this building. The primary focus is that we are a temple.

What does a temple do? What function does it serve? The first structure that served as a temple in the Bible was a portable temple called the tabernacle. In Exodus 25:8 God told Moses, “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” The temple, then, was the place where God lived among them, the place where they could meet God. In fact, it was called the tent of meeting. That didn’t mean it was like a board room where they could have meetings. It meant it was the place where they could meet *God*.

A second aspect of that same idea then is it was the place where people could encounter God’s glory. Exodus 40:34 says when the tabernacle was finally completed, “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” Later Solomon built a permanent building to replace the tabernacle. According to 2 Chronicles 5:13-14 when they dedicated the temple, it “was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God.”

The temple, then, this building that God is making us into, is the place where God lives among people, it is the place where they can meet God, and it is the place where they can see his glory. This sounds awfully presumptuous. It also doesn’t seem true. How are people seeing the glory of God by coming into contact with us, a pretty humble group that isn’t going to impress anybody?

What is the glory of God? Glory is that which is most worthy of acclaim, that which is most appealing, that which draws attention and praise. Isaiah 60:13 says, “The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the fir and the cypress together.” What was Lebanon most known for, what was its glory? Its trees. The radiance of stars is called their glory for that is what draws our attention to them. At this point in my life I feel that Proverbs 20:29 is one of the most discouraging verses in the Bible. It says, “The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old.” That which is worthy of note and praise about young men is that they are strong. That which you note about an old man is...he has gray hair. Yeah, now there’s something everybody wishes they had... Not. Well, come to think of it, gray hair would be great. I’d take any color at this point... So the glory of God is that which is most worthy of praise; that which is most appealing about him. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” John MacArthur wrote, “The gospel reveals God’s glory; that is, the perfections of his person or attributes, including his holiness.” The Gospel of grace in Christ is the apex of God’s glory. The gospel expresses most profoundly God’s love, his justice, his holiness, his wisdom, his goodness, his mercy, his providence, his power.

There are many places in the world where you can encounter some aspect of the glory of God. You get a sense of God's glory when you look at a summer sunset over the ocean with spectacular colors reflected on the water. You might surmise from such a scene that God is creative, he's powerful and that he is loving enough to provide such beauty for people. But what you cannot get from it is that God is personal, that he cares about you individually, that he is wise, that he is forgiving and merciful, and especially you get nothing about his justice, righteousness and holiness. So, yes, you get a glimpse of part of the glory of God, but you don't encounter the full picture of it.

Perhaps you experience God's glory through the beauty of music, or on a snow covered mountain slope, or in some other way. Maybe in studying science you see the marvel of creation and you are stunned at the wisdom and power of God. That's a part of his glory. But the fullest, most profound and clear expression of God's glory is in the gospel of grace. And that is going to be found in the church. You won't experience that glory at school or at work, at least not in the fullness and depth that we need to see it. You won't experience it at a football game or a baseball game or a party or concert. The place where anyone will most see the glory of God is in believers, in this building called the church.

How then are people going to encounter the glory of God in this building, this temple? That happens in two ways. First, in this building, in the church, people will hear the gospel of grace proclaimed. Yes, it will be preached and taught, and it will be proclaimed in the songs that we sing together. But it will be more than that. It will be the foundation of every life in the church. Our only reason for being a part of this temple is that we have been changed by the grace of God, given life and hope. That is the connecting point between us all. We don't gather together simply because we share a common interest in religious things. We fellowship with each other because the most important thing in our lives is the gospel of grace. It impacts everything we think, say and do, and when people are with us they will hear God's grace woven into everything we say and do. Second, they experience the grace of God through our lives. In us they see hope, joy, humility, and most of all, love for God and love for other people. All of that derives directly from the gospel of grace. And as we exhibit hope, joy, love, grace, we display the glory of God. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "We all, who with unveiled faces, contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord." Yeah, uh, no pressure there. Just live in such a way that people are going to see the glory of God in you because you are such a glorious person. That's kind of a tall order, don't you think? How are we supposed to do that?

Pay attention to the voice of the verb again in that verse. Once again it is passive, not active. It doesn't say we are transforming ourselves into his image with ever increasing glory. It says we "are being transformed." God is transforming us. I have shared this before but I have a vivid memory that is burned into my brain. Laurie and I were on vacation and we were sitting on a beach just drinking in the beauty of a glorious night. There was a full moon that night, and there was brilliant light from the moon reflecting off the ocean. It was too spectacular to even explain, and it was amazing how well we could see just by the light of the moon. But it struck us as we looked up at that glowing light in the sky that the moon is dead. We've seen the pictures from the surface of the

moon. It is nothing but dust and rock. It produces no light whatsoever. Every bit of that light glowing out from the moon was a reflection. It was the light of the sun bouncing off that dead sphere. That is what Paul was telling us. As we keep our eyes on our glorious Lord, as we make him our focus, his glory will be reflected in us, and people will actually experience the glory of God through us.

Years ago when we visited Washington DC with our kids, one afternoon we went to Arlington Cemetery and we observed the changing of the guard at the tomb of the unknown soldier. The guards that are there are really impressive. Their uniforms and appearance are immaculate. They march in precise, measured steps and they stand and walk in perfect posture. It was a touching ceremony, but one interesting effect it had on me was it made me stand up straighter. I didn't think consciously, "Hey, I should stand more erect like those guys." It just kind of affected me. Imagine what it will do to us if we keep our eyes on Jesus, if we view all of life through the lens of the gospel. God's glory is going to start working its way into us. There are some people who live in the house down below us who do some things that are really inconsiderate and impact all of their neighbors (including us). One of our neighbors called the police to try to get some help. It helped a little, but inconsiderate people just keep being inconsiderate. It is easy to get focused on those people and all they're doing and dream up ways to deal with them. But imagine if instead of looking at all that is wrong with them we focused on Jesus, and viewed the whole thing through the gospel. I'm pretty sure it would change how we think, feel and act. If we do that, if we begin to reflect the glory of God, that is going to have an impact.

Naturalist Sy Montgomery wrote in her book, *Birdology*, about the wonder of hummingbirds. Everybody loves hummingbirds. But they are truly amazing creatures. A male Allen's hummingbird, in an attempt to impress a female, can dive out of the sky at 61 miles per hour. Their wings beat so fast we can't even see them. They beat more than 60 times a second! Hummingbirds have a huge heart, up to 2.5% of its body weight, the largest percentage of all vertebrates. A person who was as active as a hummingbird would need to consume 155,000 calories a day to survive. Have you ever seen a fat hummingbird? That's probably why. Montgomery says, "Each hummingbird is a speck...yet each is an infinite mystery." She quotes a woman who studies hummingbirds. The woman says, "You know that kind of awestruck feeling you get when you look at a great work of art? That sense of wonder, that sense of connection to something great and mysterious? I feel that looking at a hummingbird."

Everyone, without exception, both wants and needs that sense of connection to something great and mysterious. What they want is to be connected to the glory of God. They don't want to just see it. They want to actually feel it, connect to it, experience it. Artists of all kinds want to affect people's hearts. They want to move them. They want their audience to feel something. Movies, for instance aim at causing us to feel something, not just see something. And we want that. Years ago M. Night Shyamalan made a movie called *Signs*. The premise was that the main character, who lived on a farm in the Midwest, found crop circles on his land. He didn't know it but this was the precursor to the arrival of alien beings, and they were coming with bad intentions. Throughout the movie tension builds to an almost unbearable point. Then there is a scene where the family is hiding in the

basement. The main character's young daughter is sitting on the floor leaning against a grate. There is an alien behind her but you don't know it because it blends in perfectly with the background. Suddenly the alien reaches through the grate and I almost jumped out of my seat. The whole thing was just scary. After my son, who was in his final year of high school, saw the movie with some of his buddies he slept with the light on in his bedroom.

Laurie and I aren't big fans of creepy movies, so that's why I remember that one so well. Why do people like to go to movies that are creepy and spooky? Because they want to feel, even if what they feel is to be spooked out of their minds. Especially they like to feel that tingly, eerie kind of scary feeling. That actually is a desire to connect with the Almighty God. Theologian Rudolf Otto called it the *mysterium tremendum*, which means tremendous mystery. Do you remember how the disciples reacted after Jesus stopped a storm on the lake with a word? They were freaked out. Who is this? But they loved it. That is what every person wants. We want to actually connect to that immense power and of Almighty God. We want to see and experience the glory of God, to be personally touched by it. **In fact, that is what will stop the rain.** It is the **only thing that can stop the rain.**

People will experience that in the temple. That's where the glory of God is. That is where they can see it, hear it, feel it, and actually be connected to it. They will never be connected to it by studying a hummingbird or anything else. They will get glimpses of it in nature of course, but those glimpses can never actually connect us to God personally.

What this says to me is that we are the most glorious building on earth. We don't have to be impressive. Remember the tabernacle was just a tent. We tend to think that we have to be big and impressive. Best if we can build a physical building that has bells and whistles and blows people away, or have a massive number and have spectacular programs. But I want you to remember the first form of the temple. It was a tent! It might have been a pretty cool tent, but it was a tent, and it wasn't going to blow anyone away. The whole area was 150 feet long and 75 feet wide, but the tabernacle proper was only 45 feet long and 15 feet wide. That's only 675 square feet, way smaller than our house. This was not an awesome structure.

When we build something we think will impress people, what do you think they will be impressed with? It will be with what people have done, not with the glory of God. The glory of God is in the gospel of grace. It is in people loving each other, people having character that reflects the holiness, love and grace of God. So what we need to do is keep looking at the glory of God, and let his glory reflect off us. We need to make sure that what people hear and see in the way we live, relate, and speak, is the gospel of grace, for then God's glory shows through.

IMPLICATIONS

YOU CAN'T FULFILL THE BUILDING'S PURPOSE UNLESS YOU ARE PART OF IT

We have some issues we are going to have to address at some point in a couple of bathrooms in our house. One of them has to do with the shower in our master bath. I was looking at one of those

shows on HGTV where people were renovating a home. They turned the master bath into a bathroom to die for. The shower was spectacular. That shower was terrific, but it has one big problem. It's not in our house. It's never going to fulfill the function of a shower in our family because it is not connected to our house.

The most obvious lesson of all from these verses is you can't be a part of the building of God if you aren't built into it. If you see yourself as off on your own, maybe dabbling in the church every now and then, you simply are not part of the temple, and not enabling it to display the glory of God. So the lesson is, you've got to be connected to the building to be a part of filling its function.

Remember that one part of a building doesn't do much good off on its own. It is when the whole building is in place that it serves its purpose. There is something special about believers together that helps people experience the glory of God and get to know him. It is when we sing his praise together that something special happens. It is when we encourage one another, and care for one another, love each other despite our flaws that people begin to see the glory of God.

In a recent conversation with our kids, our son, Toby, said something that is true and sad. I don't even remember what prompted the comment, but he said, "Church is always the first thing to go in people's lives. Everything seems to take precedence over church." He has observed that people don't go to church because their kids have a soccer tournament, or they have out of town guests, or they went to an event on Saturday night, or they want to have a family brunch, or they just don't feel like it. He's right. I read recently that studies now show the average evangelical Christian goes to church once or twice a month. This is not about doing some religious duty. But we need to think about the fact that when we are not with our brothers and sisters we are doing two things: First, we are impoverishing ourselves because we are experiencing less of the glory of God. Second, we are depriving others of that glory, because they need us there to experience it in its fullest measure.

THE FOUNDATION IS CRUCIAL

Let's imagine that you want to build a house, but you don't want to bother with all that trenching and concrete work they usually start with. You'll just find a nice flat piece of land and plop your house right on top of it. What's going to happen when a big storm with a strong wind blows in, or when a powerful earthquake shakes things up? Your house is not going to do well. In fact, even without those things you might find big cracks showing up in your walls as your house shifts.

This building requires a strong foundation. There are two key elements mentioned in this passage. The most important, the keystone is Jesus Christ. For our church to be the temple God wants it to be, he has to be the center of everything. He has to be what everything is rooted in.

But the second thing we note is that Paul says part of our foundation is the apostles and prophets. It is their message, written down for us in the Bible. Increasingly I am hearing about churches that are trying to display the glory of God, but are omitting the foundation of the apostles and prophets. It won't work. It's a house without a foundation.

REMEMBER WHO THE BUILDER IS

This takes the pressure off. God is doing the building. We are just the raw materials. So we let him do with us whatever he wants. This is so very freeing. We don't have to be what someone else is. We don't have to compete with anyone else. We simply have to be who God has created and shaped us to be. He has placed us where he wants us, and all we have to do is be where he has put us.

REMEMBER HOW GREAT THE CAUSE IS

God is building us into a temple where people can experience the glory of God and be connected to him. This is the greatest quest in all of history. This is what can stop the rain. It is being connected to God and experiencing his glory, being transformed by it, that can stop the rain.

Does that seem grandiose, too big for us? Does it feel like you should say, who, me? I have a tendency to say to God, "Are you talking to me?" Are you sure about this? We, together, are the place where people are going to see the glory of God? We have the answer for the human condition? Your glory is what will finally stop the rain from falling, and they'll experience it in us? That seems so very unlikely. Yet this is exactly what this passage says is true. Yes, God is talking to us. We're it. We're the plan. In fact, we'll see in the next chapter God has even bigger plans than that for us. But I want you to catch the vision for what God says we are. We are the temple of God. We are the place where his glory resides.

So focus on it. Don't get distracted. Be joyful because you have a quest that is worthy of every ounce of passion you have, because in this temple, *God* will stop the rain.