

## **Destroying the Temple (Temples & Tombs)**

Matthew 24:1-2

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Every time I drive by the corner of Windermere and Littleton Blvd. a million memories flood my mind, and I used to feel a pit in the bottom of my stomach.

On the corner of Windermere and Littleton Blvd. stands a gorgeous, old building. It's on the Historic Registry. The cornerstone says, "1929 - 1st Presbyterian Church of Littleton, Colorado."

I drive by and I remember.

I remember playing in the church garden.

I remember my initials etched in a pew in the balcony next to Bobby Vandekopel's.

I remember making those clay tablets of the Ten Commandments in Sunday School . . . and then eating the clay.

I remember when the Platte River flooded and homeless people slept in the halls.

I remember weird missionaries and strange Africans come to visit, with names like "Desmond Tutu."

I remember Ricky Turnquist saying, "Hey, Pete, you wanta pray in tongues?" We prayed, and I did.

I remember Jesse the Prophet who wandered the streets of Littleton dressed like Elijah. He would come to church, stand up in the middle of our liturgical service, and yell, "Preach it, brother!"

I remember Mrs. Plickard the ironing lady who lived in the trailer court. Each Sunday my new girlfriend Susan Coleman and I would pick her up for worship.

I remember sitting alone in the balcony listening to my father preach. The choir was gone, so everyone below was facing my dad. Only he could see as our new youth pastor and his friend Pat came in, tackled me in the balcony, and started ripping off my clothes and throwing them into the air. But Dad kept his composure and kept preaching. He expected as much . . . our new youth pastor was Gary Reddish.

I remember our church talent show. The youth group was doing the King Tut Dance from Saturday Night Live. My friend Andy was King Tut. We were all bending over waiting for the screen to open and the music to start. Just as it did, Pat bent over and bit Andy *so hard* in the right buttocks it drew blood. So Andrew Trawick did the King Tut Dance in front of the whole church with tears in his eyes while holding his right buttocks. Awesome!

I remember sixty high school kids like my sister Rachel, Ann Bingham, Deanne Chamberlain, Michelle Munick, Alan Parsons, Andrew Trawick, Pat Thebus, Susan Coleman, with Gary Reddish, all standing in a circle in the dark singing, “Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on me.” And He *did*. Lives were changed. People were saved. And Jesus was there. *Mystery* of the living God in the midst of that mess.

I remember my father. He was the pastor there for about fifteen years. I remember playing under his desk as a child. I remember his love and my mother’s love for God and for those people. It was my father’s house, and I learned of my Heavenly Father from my earthly father.

To me, that old, stone building was like a temple. A temple is the house of a deity.

Well, in the months ahead you may drive down Lookout Mountain Road and along about 166 South find a pit in the bottom of your stomach. If you’ve been around a while you might remember twelve or thirteen years ago when this building was being built.

You might remember how excited you were to move out of the Nature Center; how this building blew down one night in a windstorm; how the congregation came together and finished the basement themselves.

You might remember Gary Preston and Dave Getts and Gino Geraci; and all of Gretchen’s great Christmas plays; and the Vines’ gardening skills.

I’ll remember things like Aram preaching away so eloquently on Valentine’s Day while unbeknownst to him the deer were graphically illustrating his sermon right behind him on the other side of the window.

I’ll remember when Bill Hammond led us into the Prayer of Silent Confession and we heard over the speaker, “Well, how are you, Bill?” as if God Himself was asking Bill about his sins. But “God” was a “herself,” and she sounded just like Gretchen Palmer, who had left her wireless microphone on after the Children’s sermon and was talking to Bill McShane downstairs.

I’ll remember tears and laughter and people coming to Christ. I’ll remember times of intense spiritual warfare. I’ll remember visions many of you had in this room. I’ll remember sensing or believing Christ’s presence here in worship like nowhere else.

A wondrous mystery in this mess.  
This place is like a temple.

Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem for the first time when He was twelve, and He called the temple His “Father’s House.”

But in Matthew 23 Jesus delivers His woes to the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders and the keepers of the temple. He says, “Woe to you, for you shut the kingdom against men and don’t enter yourself.” “Woe to you, for you are like tombs.” Then in verse 37 He says: “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!*”

They had killed Zechariah in the temple . . . Zechariah, who had prophesied a new temple and New Jerusalem.

*“How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”*

What a statement! — as if Jesus will be in those who come in His name . . . but folks will need to call those people “blessed” in order to see Him. Next verse . . .

*Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.”*

It’s not hard to see why they crucified Jesus. In several places He prophesied the temple’s destruction. Short of accusations at His trial, witnesses came forward and accused Him of saying *He* would destroy the temple.

Well, Jesus didn’t say He would be the *agent* of destruction. Ironically He said, “*You* destroy this temple”—you *religious people*. That was disturbing. That was confusing for everyone including His disciples. The temple was where Israel met God. The temple was a million memories:

Abraham,  
Moses,  
Solomon,  
even Jesus.

So as the disciples were leaving the temple with Jesus, having just heard Him prophesy that the house was forsaken, they must have had a pit in their stomachs. In desperation they turn to Jesus and say, “Hey, Jesus. Isn’t this temple lovely? Check out the cornerstone, Jesus. Look at this gorgeous architecture!”

Jesus turns on them and says, “Listen! Not one stone will be left on top of another.” They’re *shocked* and ask, “When will this be? And when will be the close of the age?” (They couldn’t imagine life without this building.) “As for its destruction,” Jesus says, “it will happen within a generation. As for the close of the age, that day no one knows but the Father.” *Shocking* and *troubling*.

From 1979 through 1981 I was terribly troubled by events at the old building on Windermere and Littleton Blvd. In 1982 I was shocked at the news that some people had gotten my father removed from his pastorate. The Denver Presbytery wouldn’t even allow him inside the *building*. My stone temple had been destroyed.

Why would God allow such a thing?

Why would Jesus prophesy the destruction of His Father's House?

Why is God so ambivalent about stone temples, even from the start?

In II Samuel 7, when David first starts talking about building a temple, Nathan comes and prophesies saying, "Thus says the Lord, 'What are you thinking about, building me a house?! Did I ever ask you to build me a house? Ever since Egypt I've been moving about in a tent—a tabernacle for my dwelling. I'll tell you what . . . when you're dead I will raise up a son of David. And He will build my house.'"

Of course, they thought that was just Solomon . . . but we know He was talking about someone else as well.

You get the clear idea God is partial to tents that move. Stone temples stay in one place. But that's why we like them.

This "religion thing" is so much easier  
if we can keep God in one place—  
in a stone container—  
in a permanent sanctuary.

People will tell me dirty jokes in the parking lot but not in *here*—not in the *sanctuary*. *God's* here!

A dear, young woman was very upset recently because I referred to genitals in my sermon. She wrote, "That talk belongs in the Junior High boys locker room"—as if God's not *there*, but He's *here*. I think He circumcised the Jews to remind them, "Look, I'm *here* too."

If you really believed God was everywhere, I bet you'd watch different TV shows. I bet you'd never have an affair. I bet you'd pray more. I bet you'd repent more. In the end, I bet you'd sing more and live a lot more. Things would be different everywhere, not just here.

But it's easier, at least at first, if you keep the Lion of Judah in a stone container. The religious leaders in Jesus' day thought they had God contained.

Contained the mystery and controlled the mess;  
Contained God and so controlled the people.

Remember Jesus chased folks out of the temple with a whip, crying, "You shall not make my father's house a business! It is written, My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations." That is, "It's to be a living relationship with God, and you have turned it into a business you control. You contain the mystery and control the mess."

*God* is the mystery;  
*People* are the mess;  
*Life* is messy . . . have kids and you'll find that out.

Sometimes all the *life* really gets on my nerves. I'll just yell, "Coleman, stop it!" He'll say, "Stop *what*, Dad?" "Stop dancing, singing, laughing, and wrestling! Have a little respect for the dead!"

If you want control, work in a graveyard not a nursery.

The temple was to be a nursery not a tomb. But the religious folks sealed it up and kept people out . . . contained the mystery and controlled the mess. *A stone temple.*

I remember when my youth group visited the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake. There was a barricade because we weren't supposed to touch the temple. It contained the *mystery*, and we were the *mess* that would defile it. But my friend Pat jumped the barricade, ran up, and slapped the temple. The guards chased him through the temple square.

I'm not saying that was good; I'm just saying too much life can be a problem for a stone temple.

Jesus said, "This is to be a house of prayer for all nations." The religious folks had their vendors in the court of the nations. They filled up the temple with their stuff. The doors were closed. It was an exclusive club. Jesus wanted the doors *open*; Jesus *was* a door open to tax collectors, prostitutes, Pharisees, and Gentiles. And from the start God told Abraham, "You will be blessed in order to be a blessing to all nations" (Genesis 12).

For four years Lookout Mountain Community Church grew an average of 60 percent a year in size. Five years ago we went to four services, and Session realized that unless we found another place to meet we would be shutting our doors. It would be easier to stay the same and never grow in size or in depth, but Jesus doesn't like closed doors.

Jesus prophesied the destruction of that stone temple, so the religious folks tried to destroy Jesus. For love of that stone temple they killed the Lord of the temple; for love of the container, their control, and their club, they crucified the Lord they thought it contained.

But really they destroyed themselves. Within a generation, just as Jesus had prophesied, the temple became a tomb. In 70 A.D. Romans destroyed Jerusalem and leveled the temple. Josephus records, "Every one of them died with their eyes fixed on the temple"—a building.

Like the disciples, I was utterly shocked when my temple at Windermere and Littleton Blvd. was destroyed to me. It was so strange, for in 1978 that church had never seemed so alive to me, or Jesus so real.

People argue forever about this stuff, but this is the way I saw it:

- A. My father had gone through something of a personal renewal. Folks asked him to preach great philosophers, but he wanted to preach Jesus alive.
- B. The youth group was booming. Some big fish in the little pond were now little fish in a big pond. And, of course, Gary Reddish was mystery and mess.

C. The denomination was stressed about the evangelicals in its midst. So when a few folks called denominational leaders about this, they came and removed my dad. Gary had already been removed.

The club was threatened by mystery and mess,  
so they shut the doors.

Well, I can't judge in any ultimate way, but things were never the same in that old, stone building. Most people left; the youth left; of course *I* left. My father was an outlaw there.

A couple of years ago, by myself, I went back for worship. There were *signs* of life, but the new church project was "The Memorial Garden & Columbarium." They were turning the garden into an internment facility. The mission statement read, "The Memorial Garden will enhance the beauty of our historic building providing a quiet place of rest for our beloved dead."

To me, my old temple felt like a tomb.

I have nothing against tombs, but I hope this building turns into a 7-11 . . . or better yet, a nursery and daycare. And when I die, don't come visit me in a tomb or graveyard, because I won't be there. Where I will be is 100 percent *life* . . .

and dancing  
and singing  
and laughing  
and even wrestling, I suppose.

I suspect my dad will die before me. I'm sure I'll visit his grave. But when I want to remember him and sense his spirit, I won't go to a grave. I'll go to *church*, and I don't mean some building. I mean Andrew Trawick, Susan Coleman Hiatt, Gary Reddish, Kelly Smith . . . *you*. I'll come to *you*, where the same spirit lives, the temple not made with hands, the temples of living stones, the New Jerusalem coming down.

The Romans destroyed that old, stone temple, and it's never been rebuilt. Yet Jesus said, "Destroy the temple and in three days I will raise it up." John writes that He spoke of the temple of His body. That means the Living Temple came to the stone temple, and the keepers of the *stone* temple were so threatened they killed the *Living* Temple and put Him in a tomb. But the *Living* Temple will not stay in a tomb.

Jesus rose from the dead, ascended to the Father, and sent His Spirit to inhabit His living, moving temple on earth (high school kids, Gary Reddish, my dad, *you*—His body). Even as He cried, "It is finished," the curtain in the temple sanctuary ripped.

The mystery escaped  
to inhabit the mess  
for whom He died.

My friend Pat not only slapped a stone temple (I know his struggles), he also slapped the Living Temple . . . and Jesus let him. Jesus died for him. Jesus took the abuse (no barricade) so that He might romance Pat and inhabit him with grace and life. “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up.”

Well, in Matthew 28 Jesus appeared to the disciples—His new, living temple—and said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” But it appears none of them actually went. They hung around the old, stone temple for forty more years (a generation). They hung on to what they were used to—what was predictable and safe—their old memories of Jesus at the stone temple.

I think God had to shake things up. So the Romans marched on Jerusalem, and the Christians fled at the signs Jesus had prophesied. God shook the salt out of the shaker!

It was painfully obvious Jesus wasn't stuck in some stone temple. He was waiting for them in Antioch and Alexandria. He was waiting for Thomas in India and Peter in Rome. He was waiting for *me* at Fuller Seminary and in Danville, California, and at 166 S. Lookout Mountain Road. How sad if I had never left Windermere and Littleton Blvd.!

He's waiting for us across I-70. Better than waiting, He's going *with* us. “Go and make disciples; for lo, I am with you always.” We are His temple and His sanctuary.

Don't miss Him or His temple  
because you're stuck in some stone temple.

I can speak so openly because I'm so very impressed with *you*. I've heard nothing but positive comments about our move. So this is a preemptive strike: Don't miss the living temple because your eyes are fixed on a stone temple. Don't miss church for a building.

When I went back to the old, stone building on Windermere and Littleton Blvd., I remembered an angry lady. I remembered a Presbytery-run gripe session for people to offer complaints about the church. They were hurting for substance. I remember this lady I had never seen before piped up and said, “Well, all I know is that fifteen years ago the roof leaked, and Dan Hiett didn't want to fix it. And so I left and haven't been back until tonight.”

I think she meant she not only left the *building* but she left *church*. Now, God has had to deal with me for my bitterness over things like that, yet it was a tragedy . . . not for *me*, not for my *dad*, not even for the *church*, but for *her*. Just think of it! Fifteen years she had stayed away. That means she missed . . .

My initials in the balcony,  
Sunday School kids eating the clay,  
Homeless people sleeping in the halls,  
Third-graders speaking in tongues,  
Desmond Tutu,  
Jesse the Prophet,  
Mrs. Plikard the ironing lady.

She missed Gary Reddish and . . .

Andrew Trawick doing the King Tut Dance holding his right buttocks with tears in his eyes;

Messy high school kids invoking the Spirit of God;

Worship and communion, the presence of God that inhabits His temple.

In short, she had missed *church* . . . with her eyes fixed on a building. She had missed the Living Temple for a stone temple.

Don't sacrifice,  
    don't crucify,  
        don't kill the Living Temple,  
            because of a stone temple.

Of course, you really can't destroy the Living Temple. His body won't stay in any tomb; it's *born* out of tombs.

So as I walked around that old, stone temple at Windermere and Littleton Blvd., I realized that old building gave birth to Trinity Presbyterian Church, to the Evangelical Presbyterian denomination (in part), to evangelism projects around the world through Andrew and others, to callings and ministries, to *me*, and in part to *you*, here — Lookout Mountain Community Church.

I walked around the old, stone temple and realized the temple that I missed was never destroyed. It's *here* on Lookout Mountain Road:

Susan,  
    Andrew,  
        Gary,  
            Mom,  
                Dad,  
                    The Body of Christ—  
                        *You*

Soon it will be across the road.

And one day these old bodies will be destroyed. But the Spirit of Christ will live on in whatever history is left in His body, and He Himself will walk *us* into eternity where there is a new Jerusalem, a new temple, a new 1st Presbyterian Church, a new Lookout Mountain Community Church, a new Andrew Trawick and Gary Reddish, a new Dan & Evelyn Hiatt.

“Behold, I make all things new,” He says.

You can't go back to the past. You can only go *forward* to the past: the New Jerusalem. You can't destroy the true temple. However, it does appear you can miss it by mistaking it for a building.

Great things are about to happen! Don't get stuck in a building, either this one or the one on the other side of the street.

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Let's pray:

"Jesus, I thank you so much for this building. God, it has been wonderful! I thank you so much for that beautiful, new building across the road. It's awesome! But, Lord God, you didn't die for some stone building. You died for another building: your house—your people—your Bride—your temple.

"So, Lord God, I pray that you would help us to walk with great gratitude for our physical blessings, for houses that keep us warm in this cold climate, and that we would keep our eyes and our hearts fixed on your temple, for that is where you dwell. We want to see you, Lord Jesus. We *can* see you when we look at each other and say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

"May I dwell in your house, Lord Jesus, for ever. Amen."

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That was a prayer of David. When David prayed that prayer, the house of the Lord was a moveable tent with an ark in it. I imagine David was thinking about a stone temple, and when he said "all the days of my life" he was probably thinking of something like sixty more years.

David prayed that prayer, and I imagine he had no idea how great the answer would be. I don't think we do either. That's why we need to keep preaching and walking by faith. The house of the Lord is the Lord's people from thousands of years and thousands of cultures, languages, and experiences all together. And He will inhabit it all for His glory, for ever and ever and ever.

*You*, my friends, are the pearl of great price. *You* are the Bride. *You* are the temple. *You* are the sanctuary. *You* are the ones for whom our Lord died. You're the living temple. Don't miss it for any stone temple. In Jesus' name, amen.

### Further Reading

"Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"' . . . Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.'" In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

-II Samuel 7:5-7, 11b-17

"Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years."

-Malachi 3:1-4

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple. And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.

-Mark 11:15-19

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in. . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechari'ah the son of Barachi'ah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down."

-Matthew 23:13, 27-24:2

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three

days?" But he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

-John 2:17-22

Now the chief priests and the whole council sought false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.'"

-Matthew 26:59-61

When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

-John 19:30

And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

-Mark 15:37-38

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are.

-I Corinthians 3:16-17

One little caterpillar turned to the other as it saw a butterfly riding the wind overhead and said, "You ain't never gonna get me up in one of those things."

What the caterpillar calls the end God calls a butterfly.

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