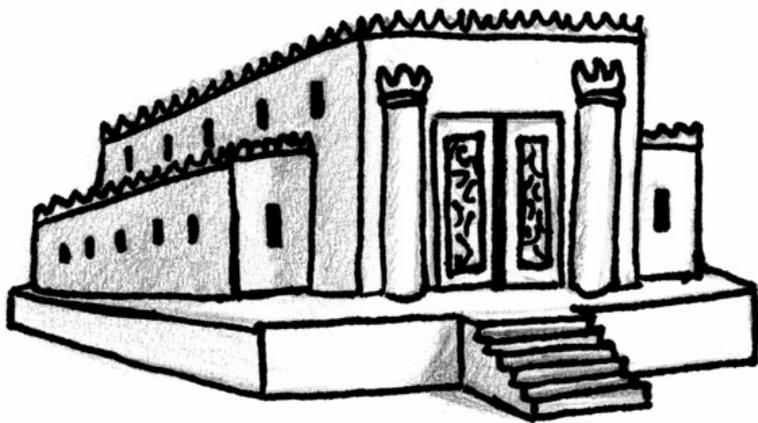


# Keepers of the Threshold





# Keepers of the Threshold

by Brian Johnston



# 1. Guarding the gates

I'm guessing that you might never have paid attention to door thresholds and most likely have hardly ever heard them discussed – except perhaps in old movies when a groom carried his bride over the threshold of their home.

As today, the threshold of antiquity was raised higher than the ground outside or the floor inside. As a result, the threshold was vital for securing the house as well as helping to keep any rubbish or debris outside. Archaeologists, however, tell us that the front door threshold of ancient houses was probably as important in symbol as it was in function. And, if all this is of such practical usefulness in the domestic setting, then the threshold of God's house must be of particular significance when we find it mentioned in the Bible. It's something which does indeed get more than a few mentions in the Old Testament.

In ancient Bible times, domestic thresholds were constructed of stone. Outside, dirt and debris would build up (especially during the rainy season) and slightly raise the ground level year by year. The threshold kept the interior of the house cleaner and

in some cases served as a step down into the house. While front door thresholds of houses are mentioned a few times in the Old Testament (check out Judges 19:27; 1 Kings 14:17), no description is given.

But not only are domestic thresholds mentioned in the Bible, but more importantly as we said, so is the threshold of God's house. Evidently, this was important, for we read of those whose function, or role, it was to be 'keepers of the threshold'. For example, we read in the Bible ...

*Now the gatekeepers were Shallum and Akkub and Talmon and Ahiman and their relatives (Shallum the chief being stationed until now at the king's gate to the east). These were the gatekeepers for the camp of the sons of Levi. Shallum the son of Kore, the son of Ebiasaph, the son of Korah, and his relatives of his father's house, the Korahites, were over the work of the service, keepers of the thresholds of the tent; and their fathers had been over the camp of the LORD, keepers of the entrance. Phinehas the son of Eleazar was ruler over them previously, and the LORD was with him. Zechariah the son of Meshelemiah was gatekeeper of*

*the entrance of the tent of meeting. All these who were chosen to be **gatekeepers at the thresholds** were 212. These were enrolled by genealogy in their villages, whom David and Samuel the seer appointed in their office of trust. **So they and their sons had charge of the gates of the house of the LORD, even the house of the tent, as guards.** (1 Chronicles 9:17-23)*

From that reading in 1 Chronicles chapter 9, it can be seen that these 'keepers of the threshold' formed a sacred order from the time of David. They guarded the gates of the house of God, so preventing the unclean from entering the sacred enclosure (2 Chronicles 23:19).

There were four gates that allowed access to Solomon's Temple. These gates faced north, south, east, and west. Six Levites were to be posted in front of the four gates. Their only responsibility was to guard the gates of the Temple night and day. The purpose of this was that these Levites, as guardians of the gates, were to see to it that no evil would enter into the Temple of God. Their sole duty was to make the people aware of the practical limits of holiness, for anyone entering the sanctuary of God unlawfully, did so under penalty of death. Some examples would be those who were unclean, such as lepers.

In all of this, it's clear to see how much God hates everything that's not sanctioned by him. His house – the place where his glory dwells – must be protected, watched over and guarded, hence the need for the 'Guardians of the Gates'. As there were guardians for the gates of the Temple long ago when it was a physical structure, just as surely those Christians who are privileged to be in God's spiritual house are intended to be similar guardians today. We're to stand guard to ensure that evil things – false doctrine, Biblical error, the world, etc. – don't encroach where they have no place.

For some of these things, there will be a special relevance for elders as we find in Acts 20. Having gathered together the church elders of the local Church of God at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul addressed them for the last time, saying:

*"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert,*

*remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” (Acts 20:28-31)*

Paul was warning the Ephesian church elders to be on the alert to guard against some entering even the circle of the elders in order to gain their own following, and to bring in destructive teachings. It was the duty, Paul said, of the existing faithful elders to keep such men and such teaching out, for they had, of course, no authorized entry into anything to do with the Church of God at Ephesus. This is a potential threat in any local church of God, even today, so elders need to be ‘keepers of the threshold’.

Equally, some things we read of in the New Testament are particularly related to teachers. In 2 Timothy 1, we find the Apostle Paul urging Timothy his young trainee teacher:

*But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.*

*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2 Timothy 1:12-14)*

Paul had set a personal example of uncompromising integrity and tenacious devotion to maintaining the purity of the teaching he had received by direct revelation from the Lord Jesus. Now he urged Timothy to follow his example. The decline and demise of the New Testament churches by the entrance of false teachers has already been indicated. Now we see that a church of God ceases to be a church of God if the foundational teaching is departed from. If a house is not built to the original pattern – this is Paul’s word and idea here – then any building or rebuilding will mean that it’s no longer the house as designed by God. In this respect, it’s vital that the threshold of God’s spiritual house is well kept.

But not only elders and teachers, all of us who answer to the first disciples found in the New Testament pattern churches of God are involved in some way.

The Apostle John, writing in 1 John 5:21, says: *guard yourselves from idols.*

There, in its context, he’s probably referring to distorted mental images or wrong thinking centring on the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we get that wrong, how can anything else be correct? ‘Guard the truth about Christ’ would seem to be John’s parting shot.

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As with Paul and John, the Apostle Peter was also urgent in his call to guard against any loss of steadfastness:

*You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:17-18)*

But it's not only doctrinal error that's to be kept out. Wrong behaviour and worldly trends and influences, with all their defiling potential, must remain outside of what can properly and spiritually

be described as God's temple today.

Paul wrote to the church of God at Rome, saying in this connection:

*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)*

It's important to keep the world out, which brings us right back to our opening description of an actual threshold as that which in ancient times ensured the rubbish was kept out in the street and not brought into the house. God help us to be 'keepers of the threshold' today!

## 2. Stewards of the treasuries

The English word 'threshold' originated from an old Anglo-Saxon word (therscvald) which literally meant 'to thresh a wood'. The first part of the old word (thersc) is the same basic word used for threshing grain, and the second part (vald) is the Anglo-Saxon/Germanic word for a wood or forest. The idea may well have been that the threshold, being in Anglo-Saxon times, a piece of wood or timber placed at the entrance of a house, was liable to be 'threshed', or 'thrashed,' as people entered and exited the building. It was the only part of a door frame that was subject to wearing away. The term 'threshold' later came to have the more general meaning of a boundary.

'Threshold' is used by the King James Version to translate two Hebrew words. The first (pronounced sawf) means a limit, or a boundary. The other Hebrew word (pronounced mif-tawn) means a sill – an elevated step which was usually made of stone in biblical times.

We've seen the practical value of a threshold in that it served to

keep the house clean, closed and secure. As functional as it was, it was also of significance as a symbol. To cross someone's threshold, unless invited, was to invade their space. There's a Bible verse, which has given rise to many and varied translations, and it talks of those who 'leap on the threshold' (Zepheniah 1:9) – seemingly a reference to some cultic practice on the thresholds of pagan temples, a practice with allusions of violence. But it does tend to emphasize the symbolism of the threshold in the ancient world.

In our study, we're especially interested, of course, in tracing its use as it concerns God's temple, or in other words, his house on this earth. Our main text for this series is:

*Now the gatekeepers were Shallum and Akkub and Talmon and Ahiman and their relatives (Shallum the chief being stationed until now at the king's gate to the east). These were the gatekeepers for the camp of the sons of Levi. Shallum the son of Kore, the son of Ebiasaph, the son of Korah, and his relatives of his father's house, the Korahites,*

*were over the work of the service, keepers of the thresholds of the tent; and their fathers had been over the camp of the LORD, keepers of the entrance. Phinehas the son of Eleazar was ruler over them previously, and the LORD was with him. Zechariah the son of Meshelemiah was gatekeeper of the entrance of the tent of meeting. All these who were chosen to be gatekeepers at the thresholds were 212. These were enrolled by genealogy in their villages, whom David and Samuel the seer appointed in their office of trust. So they and their sons had charge of the gates of the house of the LORD, even the house of the tent, as guards. The gatekeepers were on the four sides, to the east, west, north and south. Their relatives in their villages were to come in every seven days from time to time to be with them; for **the four chief gatekeepers** who were Levites, **were in an office of trust, and were over the chambers and over the treasuries in the house of God.** (1 Chronicles 9:17-26)*

As our text says very plainly, those men who were appointed from the Levites as keepers of the threshold, or gatekeepers, were occupying a very responsible position, and so had to be totally trustworthy.

Included in their responsibilities was the task of supervising the

storehouses, or treasuries, of the temple which stored all the prepared things which the people had brought. In 2 Kings 22:4 (ESV), we read the king's instruction: "*Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest, that he may count the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people.*" Hilkiyah is elsewhere called 'the son of Shallum' (Ezra 7:1-2), a name which heads up our list of threshold-keepers in 1 Chronicles 9:17. The collection referred to in Josiah's day must have been in progress for some time. As in the reign of Joash, after the terrible time of Athaliah, when it had been necessary to collect money for the repair of the temple (2 Kings 12:4), even so later, after the wicked doings of Manasseh and Amon, a renovation of the sacred building was again required, and the money needed was once more raised by a collection. Great care was taken in all such cases that an exact accounting should be kept. This was done by the keepers of the threshold. We're simply drawing attention to this as an example of the duties of the keepers of the threshold – one of which was to be stewards of the things collected from the people for temple service.

The Apostle Paul, in the New Testament, reminds us that it's

required of stewards that they're found to be faithful (1 Corinthians 4:2), and this would, in particular, apply to those who administer church funds today. There will always be a need for those who can handle the Lord's money for the Lord's work with appropriate discernment as to its use. But I would like us to take a more universal, yet personal, application. For this also may make us think of Jesus' words when he spoke of our personal storehouse, or treasury, of things learned from God through his Word.

*And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old."* (Matthew 13:52)

Scribes in Jesus' day – students of the Law of Moses – if they had caught its true meaning, were prepared for the new revelation brought by Jesus. As the Apostle Paul later taught Jews, the Law was a tutor to lead people to Christ (Galatians 3:24). So scribes of the Law could store with their previous knowledge the new understanding of God which Jesus brought. They could then draw on fresh insights, but also on things to which they were well accustomed, but which now had added meaning.

We certainly have a responsibility to treasure all things concerning Christ. This is then like a storehouse from which we can draw by the Spirit's help, as we witness to others about the Lord.

In this, Mary, the Lord's mother, sets us an excellent example. It comes at the end of the familiar lines surrounding the Saviour's birth:

*In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

*And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."*

*When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this*

*thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.”*

*So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Luke 2:8-19)*

**As we set a watch over what we store in our hearts, we act like those keepers of the threshold at the temple long ago.** How well are we

supervising the information we store away in our heart? Indeed, what is it that we think about? What sort of information do we absorb and recycle? We're responsible for all we store and how we bring it out and use it.

Our storehouse of revealed truth is indeed a treasure, and we're responsible to reflect on it like Mary, and then to open and share it with others. The Apostle Paul did that and encouraged the Corinthians to do the same:

*For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the*

*Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves ... (2 Corinthians 4:5-7)*

There could be no better treasure to have stored in our heart than the knowledge of the glory of Christ, and nothing better that we could share with others that they might – in the power of God – be turned from darkness to light.

The Christian pathway is about storing the full extent of the Gospel of Christ in our hearts as a resource to share. As he wrote his last Bible letter to Timothy, Paul describes his teaching, indeed 'the apostles' teaching', as a treasure – and so it is. He actually wrote:

*Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you. (2 Timothy 1:13-14)*

Are we adding to our store? Growing in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus? Are we bringing it out to bless others with it? As stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1), let's supervise the storehouse of our heart's personal treasury – like

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those 'keepers of the threshold'  
did long ago when responsible to  
supervise the storehouses of the  
temple treasury.

### 3. The night watchmen

One famous psalm seems to make reference to doorkeepers – or those who kept the threshold. Psalm 84 famously says:

*For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.*

*I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God*

*than dwell in the tents of wickedness. (Psalm 84:10 ESV)*

Dare I say, what may be a more accurate translation, clarifies the situation as:

*For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside.*

*I would rather **stand at the threshold** of the house of my God*

*Than dwell in the tents of wickedness. (NASB)*

The sense of the contrast being made seems to demand that the humblest position associated with God's house was preferable to being in the tents of wickedness. To be an official doorkeeper, or a keeper of the threshold, was a respected and responsible position of trust – so the contrast offered is less striking. The basic idea here is to 'sit' or 'stand' at the threshold,

as if denoting those who barely qualify to be there.

So, although, most likely, the actual doorkeeper is not featured in that Psalm, we probably have come to associate it – of all scriptures – most readily with the office of the doorkeeper long ago, especially in God's house.

However our main text is ...

*Now the gatekeepers were Shallum and Akkub and Talmon and Ahiman and their relatives (Shallum the chief being stationed until now at the king's gate to the east). These were the gatekeepers for the camp of the sons of Levi. Shallum the son of Kore, the son of Ebiasaph, the son of Korah, and his relatives of his father's house, the Korahites, were over the work of the service, keepers of the thresholds of the tent; and their fathers had been over the camp of the LORD, keepers of the entrance. Phinehas the son of Eleazar was ruler over them previously, and the LORD was with him. Zechariah the son of Meshelemiah was gatekeeper of the entrance of the tent of meeting. All these who were chosen to be gatekeepers at the thresholds were 212. These were enrolled by genealogy in their villages, whom David and*

*Samuel the seer appointed in their office of trust. So they and their sons had charge of the gates of the house of the LORD, even the house of the tent, as guards. The gatekeepers were on the four sides, to the east, west, north and south. Their relatives in their villages were to come in every seven days from time to time to be with them; for **the four chief gatekeepers** who were Levites, were in an office of trust, and were over the chambers and over the treasuries in the house of God. **They spent the night around the house of God, because the watch was committed to them.** (1 Chronicles 9:17-27)*

These men

- formed a sacred order (1 Chronicles 9:22; 23:5) from the time of David.
- They guarded the gates of the house of the LORD (1 Chronicles 9:23),
- closing and opening them at the proper times (1 Chronicles 9:27),
- so preventing the unclean from entering the sacred enclosure (2 Chronicles 23:19).
- They also had charge of the sacred vessels and of the free-will offerings (2 Chronicles 31:14),

- and lived in chambers at the temple (1 Chronicles 9:27).
- They were Levites, and came in from the Levitical villages every seventh day for service in their turn (1 Chronicles 9:25).
- Their office was honourable, ranking with the singers, after the priests and Levites (Ezra 2:42; 1 Chronicles 15:18).

We've already commented on the fact that these keepers of the threshold were said to be in an office of trust. In fact, a literal translation of Jeremiah 52:24 talks about: '*Seraiah the head priest, and Zephaniah the second priest, and the three keepers of the threshold.*' It reads there as if, at that time at least, the 'keepers of the threshold' ranked immediately after the high priest and his deputy in the way they were viewed by others. This underlines the point that theirs was seen as a responsible position.

When Jeremiah was once asked to demonstrate the integrity of certain people (the Rechabites), by inviting them to drink wine contrary to their father's command, he says: *I brought them to the house of the LORD into the chamber of the sons of Hanan the son of Igdaliah, the man of God, which was near the chamber of the officials, above*

*the chamber of Maaseiah the son of Shallum, keeper of the threshold* (Jeremiah 35:4). These were quarters so revered that none would call into question the unusual activity that was being transacted there. Again, we see another indication of nothing but respect for the keepers of the threshold.

By going a little further in our reading from 1 Chronicles 9 this time, we've picked up on yet another element of the duties of those who formerly were known as 'keepers of the threshold' – namely that they were also the night watchmen of God's house. Night-time brings its own dangers, with the threat of opportunist or scavenging prowlers as well as organised surprise attacks by the enemy.

Night watchmen had to remain vigilant, straining to detect the first sign of anything that could conceivably threaten the temple within the threshold. There's a famous Bible verse which asks:

*Watchman, what of the night?*  
(Isaiah 21:11).

This world is full of dangers to those who watch out for the things of God. We, too, require vigilance against trends which endanger the lives of God's people, and threats to their well-being.

From the mythology of the Greeks, the term 'Trojan horse'

has become familiar to many. The Greek army had been unable to breach the city of Troy. But what they couldn't achieve by force of arms, they succeeded in doing by subtlety. They retreated from their position surrounding the city, leaving behind, it appeared, the gift of a large wooden horse. Relieved, the inhabitants of the beleaguered city, came out to receive their gift, and to bring it into their city. But, things were not as innocent as they seemed. The large wooden horse was hollow and Greek soldiers were concealed within it. At an appropriate unsuspecting moment, the soldiers left their hiding place and opened the gates of the city to allow the rest of their returning army to enter.

So the term 'Trojan horse' has come to describe anything which at first sight appears innocent in itself, even desirable to, and welcomed by, us – seemingly free from any apparent threat - but which, on the contrary, if invited into our lives, contains within it the power to do significant damage. Some who were once secure in their faith, have ended up making shipwreck of it after entertaining what had seemed initially to be an acceptable or compatible secular idea. This has happened to people who began to accommodate contemporary ideas on the inspiration of the

Bible; or the Bible's account of origins; or the resurrection of Christ. We must be so careful with the ideas we entertain, and screen them thoroughly against all of Bible truth, for ideas have consequences, and the consequences can prove to be more far-reaching than we at first suspect.

God's house, with all its holy preciousness to God, requires diligence on our part to ensure it is kept clear of corrupting influences from our secular surroundings.

But it doesn't have to be an intellectual idea which we allow to enter our minds for it to become our undoing. We might also adopt a behaviour or practice which at first sight seems innocent enough. "Surely, there's no harm in it," we say. But it has often proved to be the case, that one thing led to another. Once the principle of integrity has been compromised, we're on a slippery slope.

The Bible often uses the description 'the night' with spiritual overtones. During the story of the betrayal of our Lord, we read that Judas went out 'and it was night.' That's not only telling us the time of the day. It's a masterful literary touch, which equally alluded to the character

of the foul deed Judas was initiating at that moment.

In the Apostle Paul's writings, he warns Christians concerning sins which are characteristic of the night, this world's dark night, the spiritual darkness which is the result of rejecting the light of God's revelation. How dark is the understanding which has wilfully shut out the knowledge of God! There's no doubt that this is a darkening world. **Are we fulfilling our night-watchman duties as 'keepers of the threshold' by remaining alert to the dangers of the night?**

When Paul was writing to the Thessalonians – and in that first letter of his to them – he finishes every single chapter with some mention of the return of Christ. In the fifth chapter, he warns of the coming night which will fully engulf this world after Christ has taken his Church away from it – all who are believers on himself. Paul says:

*Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. (1 Thessalonians 5:6-8)*

## 4. Opening the doors

Ancient doors had two socket-stones, one above and one at the foot. The pivot post of the door (or a gate) turned on a stone sunk into the floor, which had a hole hollowed out for the pivot post to turn in. At the top of the pivot post was a counter socket stone. The door was attached to the rotating post. This idea is the basis of the Bible proverb

*As the door turns on its hinges,  
So does the sluggard on his bed. (Proverbs 26:14)*

This proverb still makes some sense as we think of modern door hinges, but its full graphic force is best appreciated when we realize that doors in olden times were fixed to a tall post which turned in socket-stones – to which the turning of the lazy man on his bed is compared.

Doors, of course, are made to be opened, but the presence of doorkeepers or ‘keepers of the threshold’, ensured this was a controlled access point. This was especially important when we are thinking about the temple for God which Solomon built. There were four gates which gave access at each of the four compass points. Let’s read again

our now familiar text from First Chronicles chapter 9, and discover a fourth duty of those who were the keepers of the threshold ...

*Now the gatekeepers were Shallum and Akkub and Talmon and Ahiman and their relatives (Shallum the chief being stationed until now at the king's gate to the east). These were the gatekeepers for the camp of the sons of Levi. Shallum the son of Kore, the son of Ebiasaph, the son of Korah, and his relatives of his father's house, the Korahites, were over the work of the service, keepers of the thresholds of the tent; and their fathers had been over the camp of the LORD, keepers of the entrance. Phinehas the son of Eleazar was ruler over them previously, and the LORD was with him. Zechariah the son of Meshelemiah was gatekeeper of the entrance of the tent of meeting. All these who were chosen to be gatekeepers at the thresholds were 212. These were enrolled by genealogy in their villages, whom David and Samuel the seer appointed in their office of trust. So they and their sons had charge of the gates of the house of the LORD, even the house of the tent, as*

*guards. The gatekeepers were on the four sides, to the east, west, north and south. Their relatives in their villages were to come in every seven days from time to time to be with them; for **the four chief gatekeepers** who were Levites, were in an office of trust, and were over the chambers and over the treasuries in the house of God. They spent the night around the house of God, because the watch was committed to them; and **they were in charge of opening it morning by morning.** (1 Chronicles 9:17-27)*

And in that last verse, we have once again a further assigned task for 'the keepers of the threshold.' They were in charge of opening the gate morning by morning – that is, they allowed or facilitated access to all who should be able to gain entrance to God's house, while being charged with preventing entry to unauthorised persons.

I'm reminded at this point of words Jesus spoke to some lawyers one day – that is, to those who considered themselves to be experts in the Law of Moses. In Luke chapter 11, Jesus had this to say to these lawyers:

*But He said, "Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even*

*touch the burdens with one of your fingers. Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and it was your fathers who killed them. So you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers; because it was they who killed them, and you build their tombs. For this reason also the wisdom of God said, 'I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.' Woe to you lawyers! **For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering.**" (Luke 11:46-52)*

It's that last part which is of particular interest in relation to our topic. Here were people who studied God's law. It was good that they did, but they didn't get the benefit from it which was God's intention. The failure lay entirely with them, of course. They took away the key of knowledge. Their distorted presentations of God's law obscured what God had made clear. A delightful picture is presented here of a key of

knowledge. Jesus has just finished charging the Jewish religious leaders with murdering the prophets whom God had sent with his messages to the nation. He spoke of one of them who was killed between the altar and the temple, referred to by the Lord as the house of God. So, Jesus has just been speaking about God's house. And, in the very next verse, he talks about the key of knowledge. That would seem to lead us to conclude that **God's house should be a place of learning, a house of knowledge of the true God and his ways.**

These leading lawyers, experts in the Mosaic law, should have helped the people to get the maximum insight into the teaching and ways of God. But even they themselves missed it. What was worse, they effectively denied access to the same truth for so many others. Later on in the Bible, the Apostle James would warn Christian Jews not to be too eager to be teachers (3:1). It was for this very reason. For when Bible teachers get it wrong, they bear the responsibility for misguiding others, and not only themselves.

In modern times, the extreme examples have been cult leaders, who have destroyed the lives of those who blindly followed them. The events which transpired at

Jonestown and Waco are still chilling to review.

We should – by contrast – be those who open up the Word of God, allowing others to enter with us into the true knowledge of God and his ways. The keepers of the threshold in Old Testament times literally admitted many into God's house. Through the correct opening up of the Scriptures today, believers are to be helped to make progress into God's spiritual house. Knowing God in his house of knowledge is the goal, and using the Bible is the key.

When the Lord taught those two disciples on their weary journey to Emmaus recorded in Luke 24, we read:

*Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther. But they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over." So He went in to stay with them. When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their*

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*sight. They said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?"* (Luke 24:27-32)

That must have been the most exciting Bible study ever! It made all the difference to those two disillusioned followers of Jesus, who had wrongly thought that the cross had crushed all their hopes of the Christ. But those who believe in Jesus can never be disappointed, not in him, not when they come to a true understanding. The original word they used to describe Jesus 'explaining the Scriptures' was the word meaning 'to open

thoroughly.' That's the target for every Bible teacher. It is to open up the Word of God: to make the truths it contains accessible to the listener.

But the experts of the law whom Jesus condemned had done the opposite. Missing God's truth themselves, they precluded others access by means of their distorted personal misunderstandings.

May God help us to have the way into God's house – the house of knowledge – clearly opened up to us. That's the responsibility of today's 'keepers of the threshold.' They are literally 'key men'!

# 5. Auditing the utensils

I'm sure you're familiar now with our Bible text, but it's worth re-reading to give the context for the last few verses:

*Now the gatekeepers were Shallum and Akkub and Talmon and Ahiman and their relatives (Shallum the chief being stationed until now at the king's gate to the east). These were the gatekeepers for the camp of the sons of Levi. Shallum the son of Kore, the son of Ebiasaph, the son of Korah, and his relatives of his father's house, the Korahites, were over the work of the service, keepers of the thresholds of the tent; and their fathers had been over the camp of the LORD, keepers of the entrance. Phinehas the son of Eleazar was ruler over them previously, and the LORD was with him. Zechariah the son of Meshelemiah was gatekeeper of the entrance of the tent of meeting. All these who were chosen to be gatekeepers at the thresholds were 212. These were enrolled by genealogy in their villages, whom David and Samuel the seer appointed in their office of trust. So they and their sons had charge of the gates of the house of the LORD, even the house of the tent, as guards. The gatekeepers were on*

*the four sides, to the east, west, north and south. Their relatives in their villages were to come in every seven days from time to time to be with them; for the four chief gatekeepers who were Levites, were in an office of trust, and were over the chambers and over the treasuries in the house of God. They spent the night around the house of God, because the watch was committed to them; and they were in charge of opening it morning by morning. **Now some of them had charge of the utensils of service, for they counted them when they brought them in and when they took them out. Some of them also were appointed over the furniture and over all the utensils of the sanctuary** ... (1 Chronicles 9:17-29)*

It's as if we're uncovering the duties of these keepers of the threshold one line at a time. In addition to being the guards of the temple entrances; and the supervising stewards of its collections from the people; and its night-watchmen; and responsible for admitting into its precincts those who had a right to be there; they also kept an inventory of the temple utensils

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– that is, of the equipment used in the various services of the temple. They controlled, or audited, the inventory of all the utensils. They counted each item that was signed out and they counted them when they were signed back in.

It reminds me of the journey which Ezra (8:24-30) records in the Bible book which bears his name. He was leading another wave of returning Israelites, coming back from the territories of the Persian Empire to help take forward the restoration of temple service at Jerusalem. This was after a period of captivity when there had been – for 70 years – no temple or house for God at Jerusalem. At that time, as he prepared for his journey, we read of Ezra counting out valuable donated items into the hands of trusted priests. Later after they had transported them, Ezra also counted them in at Jerusalem at the end of the journey. What was counted out, was also counted in; the entire inventory was all checked. Ezra was ensuring there was nothing missing, nothing unaccounted for. There were to be no grounds for any finger of suspicion: the operation of God's house demands complete discretion and integrity. Those who function there serve the Lord God. And it was the same routinely at Jerusalem under the controlling eyes of the keepers of the

threshold. They were responsible for ensuring nothing went missing or was mislaid.

In God's purpose, there's a spiritual counterpart today to the temple at Jerusalem in the time of the Old Testament. For the New Testament similarly describes faithful believers in 1 Peter 2:5 who are built up to be a spiritual house for God, a holy priesthood, responsible for offering to God in worship, acceptable spiritual sacrifices of praise to the glory of his Name.

As we see from any reading of 1Corinthians 3:16-17, this house, also, is capable of being destroyed, as was its Old Testament physical counterpart. Corrupt teaching, that which departs from the Biblical standard of the Apostles' teaching, once led to its destruction about 1900 years ago, after the time of the Apostles. So, we must carefully distinguish this New Testament temple from the Church which is Christ's Body. Christ's Church, which he announced first in Matthew 16, cannot be destroyed, nor can it even be affected by sin. Christ's Church is never once referred to in the New Testament as a temple or sanctuary (Gk. *naos*).

Now, although we said God's temple on earth, by contrast, can be destroyed – and indeed it was

early on in the Church Age – yet it remains a biblical possibility that there can be once again – through human obedience – such a thing as a temple for God on earth if care is taken. Yes, care needs to be taken in the accurate handling of scripture and the proper use of spiritual gift, exactly as care had to be taken in the days of the designated ‘keepers of the threshold’ – those men who were entrusted with handling such details as the preserving of the temple inventory of equipment and accounting for its whereabouts. Without these items, there could hardly be any service for God.

And as we now translate that physical picture of the Old Testament into its spiritual New Testament counterparts, we at once notice that God’s service still requires equipping so that it may function according to God’s specified design. Ephesians 4 says:

*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to*

*be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.*  
(Ephesians 4:11-15)

Now, perhaps you may say to me, that this is talking about corporate growth in the Body of Christ. And, did I not earlier make a distinction between Christ’s Body and God’s Temple today? I did, and I stand by that.

We need to re-read this section of Ephesians 4 more closely, perhaps. You should be able to see that the gifts, which the ascended Christ has given to the Body, are designed to equip each believer for serving the Lord. And the yardstick for the effective use of these gifts is to measure their results over against the goal which is here set out as being that of a visible unity of Christian disciples. God’s ongoing intention in equipping us with spiritual gifts is to see materializing again today the very same unity which first occurred in the historic New Testament Churches of God, described in the book of Acts. Individual Christians back then were not isolated, independent, individualistic or competitive, but they were added together, built up, fitted together in a community where all believed

and practiced the same Apostles' teaching which visibly united them across large geographical areas in the early fellowship of the churches of God. They were ruled by a fellowship of elders represented in every church location.

As this section in Ephesians 4 plainly announces, it's vital that Christian believers talk to each other today – and talk doctrinally and lovingly – if there's to be any improvement on the sad situation where we do find practically every wind of doctrine and indeed so many believers who are all at sea doctrinally. That is not the mature picture which God calls for here. Hasn't something gone wrong with us at the human level of our equipping each other? For we're clearly not achieving God's desire for a visible unity – a unity which expresses the underlying mystical union of the Church the Body. And that's how the two things – the temple and the Body – although different – are related. The only fitting testimony to the union of all believers in Christ, is biblical and doctrinal unity among practising disciples on earth, as in the early churches of God. God's plan hasn't changed. But, we have to ask, how have we handled the utensils at our disposal, how have we used the gifts given to us?

The Apostle Paul develops the picture in ...

*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

The gifts must operate under the guidance and direction of the inspired Scriptures. Only this will ensure we're properly equipped. Then, perhaps, there's a sense Paul takes it a little further. It's true he's already spoken, as we've seen, of gifted people equipping others. In 2 Timothy, he goes the whole way of seeing believers as actually being the vessels or utensils in God's service:

*Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. (2 Timothy 2:20-21)*

We may need to be more grateful than we presently realize to modern-day 'keepers of the threshold', as it were, in other words those who use their gifts to so equip us for adequacy under God in our service – so

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that when the Master returns for the ultimate audit of the vessels of his house, he'll find us present and correct, having made a modest contribution – but one recognisably useful to him – within the overall advancement of his plans in the here and now.

## 6. Preparing the perfume

For one final time, we'll read again ...

*Now the gatekeepers were Shallum and Akkub and Talmon and Ahiman and their relatives (Shallum the chief being stationed until now at the king's gate to the east). These were the gatekeepers for the camp of the sons of Levi. Shallum the son of Kore, the son of Ebiasaph, the son of Korah, and his relatives of his father's house, the Korahites, were over the work of the service, keepers of the thresholds of the tent; and their fathers had been over the camp of the LORD, keepers of the entrance. Phinehas the son of Eleazar was ruler over them previously, and the LORD was with him. Zechariah the son of Meshelemiah was gatekeeper of the entrance of the tent of meeting. All these who were chosen to be gatekeepers at the thresholds were 212. These were enrolled by genealogy in their villages, whom David and Samuel the seer appointed in their office of trust. So they and their sons had charge of the gates of the house of the LORD, even the house of the tent, as guards. The gatekeepers were on the four sides, to the east, west, north and south. Their relatives*

*in their villages were to come in every seven days from time to time to be with them; for the four chief gatekeepers who were Levites, were in an office of trust, and were over the chambers and over the treasuries in the house of God. They spent the night around the house of God, because the watch was committed to them; and they were in charge of opening it morning by morning. Now some of them had charge of the utensils of service, for they counted them when they brought them in and when they took them out. **Some of them also were appointed** over the furniture and over all the utensils of the sanctuary and **over the fine flour and the wine and the oil and the frankincense and the spices**. Some of the sons of the priests **prepared the mixing of the spices**. Mattithiah, one of the Levites, who was the firstborn of Shallum the Korahite, had the responsibility over the things which were baked in pans. (1 Chronicles 9:17-31)*

Well, perhaps a Bible text which was a little obscure previously to some of us, has at least become more familiar. And we trust there's been merit in that. I

confess it's a little difficult to draw a clear line under the distinctive duties of these 'keepers of the threshold', but it's hard to make any split within verse 29. So we find that, just as they were appointed over the utensils, they equally were appointed over the flour and wine and oil and frankincense and spices – those things that were mixed in verse 30. And when we come to verse 31, and the responsibility of the things baked in pans, there is mention once again of Shallum, the leading threshold-keeper with whom this entire section begins. I presume the reference to things baked in pans mainly features the grain offering which is described fully in Leviticus chapter 2.

That may well be as neat an end to the section describing the duties of the threshold-keepers as we're able to draw, and keeps them distinct from the singers who follow.

The fine flour for the offerings we've mentioned, together with the wine for the libations which were poured on some offerings at least, plus the mention of frankincense and spices, brings us firmly into the realm of the worship of God's house as it was prescribed in Old Testament times.

If we recap Exodus 30, we'll rediscover the extreme care which had to be taken in these things:

*Moreover, the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Take also for yourself the finest of spices: of flowing myrrh five hundred shekels, and of fragrant cinnamon half as much, two hundred and fifty, and of fragrant cane two hundred and fifty, and of cassia five hundred, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and of olive oil a hin. You shall make of these a holy anointing oil, a perfume mixture, the work of a perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil. With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the laver and its stand. You shall also consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them shall be holy. You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister as priests to Me. You shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on anyone's body, nor shall you make any like it in the same proportions; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever shall mix any like*

*it or whoever puts any of it on a layman shall be cut off from his people."*

*Then the LORD said to Moses, "Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. With it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, and holy. You shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you. The incense which you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the LORD. Whoever shall make any like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people." (Exodus 30:22-38)*

So, for both the oil and the incense, each of which was comprised of a blend of spices, there was a precise and unique recipe. There's no worship like the worship of God in his house. Here in ancient times the people of God gathered for the corporate worship of God, something in advance of personal praise. Wouldn't it be a great shame – not to say tragic – if we missed out on what answers to this today?

The New Testament shows us that Christ's early followers

gathered together every first day of the week to break bread in churches of God. They 'assembled themselves together' for worship, as Hebrews 10:25 puts it in the overall collective context of that magnificent letter. The strength of the corporate connection is made very explicit in 1 Corinthians 11 when Paul asks those who were despising the breaking of the bread if they realized they were actually despising the church of God when they 'came together as a church' for that purpose. It's clear that the Lord's table again belonged in God's house where God's people were gathered together for worship. Here, in the New Testament churches of God, was to be found the one spiritual association of disciples gathered to the Name, which replaced the Old Testament's one geographical 'place of the Name' (Deuteronomy 12).

When God's people gather themselves together for worship in God's way, the men audibly lead the corporate worship (1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12). But we shouldn't even think of the men bringing an individual or personal contribution; they're leading the congregation of the Lord's people in what they present to God on their behalf.

There's an attractive picture of Israelites bringing their baskets

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of firstfruits to God in Deuteronomy chapter 26. And we might like to think of the care with which the various components were presented attractively in that basket; it's hardly plausible they were simply thrown together with no thought, as the people then prepared to bring their offering to God's house. It's tempting to borrow that picture in motivating each other to thoughtful presentation of our worship – which the Bible itself describes as 'the fruit of [our] lips' (Hebrews 13:15). If we should borrow that picture of baskets of fruit, let's not fall into the trap of thinking of some kind of competition between individual baskets with their varied displays as to which is a worthy presentation. Should we not rather be thinking of each contribution, being on behalf of all, and so contributing to an overall collage of the fruit we're presenting corporately to God?

It's not about me offering my offering – brothers vocally, and

sisters silently – but it's about personal exercise beforehand in thoughtful preparation, later blended with spontaneous freshness, and all integrating within the overall fruitful display, if we may talk in these terms.

How careful we need to be in thinking accurately of these matters, so as to be fully pleasing to God. Once again, we're indebted, I feel, to those conscientious 'keepers of the threshold' of a bygone era of God's house – among whose duties was included supervision of the spices and offerings. And what a wealth of principle they've left us with: being the guards of the temple entrances; the supervising stewards of the people's contributions; the temple's night-watchmen; those responsible for admitting into its precincts only those who had a right to be there; keepers of an inventory of the temple equipment; and supervisors of the worship ingredients.

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