

Building the Temple – 1 Kgs 6

Last week we looked at the beginning of Solomon's reign, how the people were happy and prosperous, living at peace, because Solomon was using the wisdom God gave him. We also saw the beginnings of his plans to build a temple for God, to honor and praise God for His goodness to Israel. Solomon asked King Hiram of Tyre to provide cedars of Lebanon and cypress for the temple, which was then floated to Israel as rafts. We pick up today with the actual work of building the temple, a massive public works project.

In 1 Kgs 5:13-18, "King Solomon drafted forced labor out of all Israel, and the draft numbered 30,000 men. And he sent them to Lebanon, 10,000 a month in shifts. They would be a month in Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the draft. Solomon also had 70,000 burden-bearers and 80,000 stonecutters in the hill country, besides Solomon's 3,300 chief officers who were over the work, who had charge of the people who carried out the work. At the king's command they quarried out great, costly stones in order to lay the foundation of the house with dressed stones. So Solomon's builders and Hiram's builders and the men of Gebal did the cutting and prepared the timber and the stone to build the house."

That's quite the work crew! Over 183,000 workers (it doesn't seem that Hiram's builders were included in these numbers). Of course, when you realize that this was in the days before motorized, mechanized building equipment, massive amounts of manpower was needed to move these large trees and cut stones. I can't imagine the organizational skills needed to manage this sort of work crew, but again we see the wisdom that God gave to Solomon, as divisions of labor are referenced, some working the timber, some working the quarries, some simply as burden-bearers, and others as supervisors. We even have reference to shift work, so the people were able to spend time at home. You may wonder about the mention of forced labor. 1 Kings 9:20-22 tells us, "All the people who were left of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, who were not of the people of Israel—their descendants who were left after them in the land, whom the people of Israel were unable to devote to destruction—these Solomon drafted to be slaves, and so they are to this day. But of the people of Israel Solomon made no slaves. They were his soldiers, they were his officials, his commanders, his captains, his chariot commanders and his horsemen."

Why is this detail important? There are a couple of reasons. First, Solomon didn't enslave his own people, but allowed them to continue their own work of farming, herding, etc. as well as serving in the army. The ones who were forced into labor are the descendants of the Canaanites who were left after the conquest of the land. In Deut 20:10-12, God commanded, "When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it." This was the command for the cities far from their inheritance, but for those within their territory, God said (v. 16-18) "...you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God." The second reason is found here. Those people that Solomon placed into forced labor were there because his forefathers had not obeyed God in destroying those populations. God didn't want His people to fall into the same sinful practices as these Canaanites.

By putting them to forced labor, Solomon was partially obeying God's command, but this left the door open for him and his people to be influenced by these pagans – which is exactly what happened.

Back to the building of the temple, 1 Kgs 6:1 – “In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the Lord.” The text goes on to describe the dimensions and details of the house. Down in v. 7, “when the house was built, it was with stone prepared at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the house while it was being built.” The process of building did everything possible to establish the sense of holiness at the site of the temple, as every timber and stone was prepared to be set in place without tools, picturing God's perfection. It took seven years to complete the building, as we are told in v. 38.

When you read through the description of this house, it truly is awe-inspiring. The inside walls were lined with cedar, and the floor was of cypress wood. The cedar on the walls was carved with gourds and flowers. The walls were then overlaid with pure gold. At the entrance were two massive bronze pillars, and the ornate wooden doors were overlaid with gold. Everywhere were carved palm trees and cherubim, overlaid with gold. It truly demonstrated the beauty, glory, and majesty of God.

We come to v. 11, “Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon, ‘Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my rules and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel.’” God was pleased with Solomon, and blessed him, but once again we have a warning – “if” you walk in my statutes, etc. God knows our fickle nature, how quickly we can go from faithful obedience to failure, and He reminds us what we need to do to stay in right relation to Him. Yes, Solomon wanted to honor God, and was building the temple for that reason. Yes, Solomon humbled himself and asked for God's wisdom. We also read in 7:8 that Solomon had married Pharaoh's daughter, giving a hint of what would later draw his heart away from God.

You and I may be worshiping God with a good heart today, but we can't rest on that – we have to actively seek to worship and obey Him each day. Simply putting on a good show isn't enough. Giving Him expensive gifts isn't enough. He wants continued obedience, faithful living from a heart that loves Him.