

Succession | Good News from Bad Kings

“Solomon, The Builder”

First Kings 8.10-13, 27-30, 54-61 and Isaiah 57.17

9.17.23

¹Kings ⁸ *It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹ so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. ¹² Then Solomon said, "The LORD has said that He would dwell in the thick cloud. ¹³ "I have surely built You a lofty house, A place for Your dwelling forever."*

²⁷ *"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built! ²⁸ "Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O LORD my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You today; ²⁹ that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, toward the place of which You have said, 'My name shall be there,' to listen to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place. ³⁰ "Listen to the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; hear in heaven Your dwelling place; hear and forgive."*

⁵⁴ *When Solomon had finished praying this entire prayer and supplication to the LORD, he arose from before the altar of the LORD, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread toward heaven. ⁵⁵ And he stood and blessed all the assembly of Israel with a loud voice, saying: ⁵⁶ "Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised; not one word has failed of all His good promise, which He promised through Moses His servant. ⁵⁷ "May the LORD our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; may He not leave us or forsake us, ⁵⁸ that He may incline our hearts to Himself, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances, which He commanded our fathers. ⁵⁹ "And may these words of mine, with which I have made supplication before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that He may maintain the cause of His servant and the cause of His people Israel, as each day requires, ⁶⁰ so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no one else. ⁶¹ "Let your heart therefore be wholly devoted to the LORD our God, to walk in His statutes and to keep His commandments, as at this day."*

Isa. 57.1 ⁵ *For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite."*

We're looking at the succession of kings in ancient Israel (about 1000BC – 600BC), starting with the Son of David, King Solomon. He's the third human king in ancient Israel (after Saul and David) and last week we saw, in the opening chapters of *The Book of Kings*, that David has died, and God established Solomon to govern Israel in wisdom ("The Wisdom of Solomon").

We're summarizing long sections so do go back and read the whole CHs 4-9 this week – fascinating!

Last week, we looked at *“Solomon, the Wise”* and this week, *“Solomon, the Builder”*. The readings this week are from First Kings CH Eight, and that chapter is mostly Solomon’s long prayer prayed at the dedication of the Temple and then (3rd paragraph) a blessing for the people.

David, the man of war, was not allowed by God to build the Temple – so David gathered up many of the materials for his son Solomon – to build a centralized space for the worship of Israel’s God.

The whole idea of a fixed center of worship, a sacred space, a kind of throne or headquarters for God on Earth, THAT raised a lot of questions for Israel, questions they didn’t always answer rightly. AND it raises questions for us as well – the whole metaphysical quandary we all begin to ponder even as young children: “Mommy, where IS God?” Where DOES God LIVE? Is God’s presence somehow positioned in one locality more than in another? Where IS God? How DO we answer that question? If God is everywhere... is He really ANYwhere? Is He on His throne... in heaven, in the Church, in your heart? Is God, in any sense, located?

And to answer these questions, thinkers have arrived at some categories to describe the Divine Presence – God’s transcendence and God’s immanence. That God is above us, transcends us, other than we are. Some of God’s attributes we DON’T share; He’s infinite, eternal and unchangeable and we’re NOT. The other category is God’s immanence, God’s nearness, with-ness, relatability; the qualities in God we are capable of sharing to some degree: being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

So, let’s use these categories to look at Solomon’s main building project – the Temple as God’s dwelling:

- 1 – God ABOVE Us – Transcendence**
- 2 – God NEAR Us – Immanence**
- 3 – God IN Us – God’s Humility**

In the Temple Solomon was to build, there were lots of symbols and features in the architecture and furnishings communicating to worshipers that God is transcendent; He’s above us and different, other, holy, incomprehensible. God communicates His otherness e.g., by the high hill on which the Temple was built. We go up to God’s presence; He’s above us, transcendent. *“Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place?”* (Ps. 24.3)

There are everywhere, signs, symbols, emblems, indications that God is holy and different and unique. The building materials increase in value as we move through the three courts of the Temple. Wood, bronze, silver and finally, in the Inner Court, a cube – everything in gold.

The stone is clothed with wood like garments on a body. The gold reflects light and brightness and differentness.

And above all is the symbol of God’s presence, carried in a special way. The Ark of the Covenant is brought into the Temple and the innermost “holy place” on poles. AND IN that moment the difference between God and human beings is somehow accentuated in the extreme as a cloud of light comes down around the Ark and the Temple. What could be more other-worldly and mysterious and incomprehensible to human beings where in OUR world, a CLOUD OBSCURES and darkens? But THIS is a cloud of light... think of that for a second.

AND the cloud of light is heavy... it's THICK. It's glory – that's the Hebrew word (v. 11 - קָבוֹד - kabōd). It means, "HEAVY" or weighty or significant. The whole moment is so significant; the cloud so heavy with light, so pressing that the priests couldn't stand it. It's the same cloud seen in the wilderness and the same cloud that enveloped Jesus Christ and His disciples in the Transfiguration where even the clothing of Jesus Christ glowed with unbearable brightness (Matthew 17). "While Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them..." I've heard of LIGHT as particles or as waves but a CLOUD? I can't comprehend that. And again – WE DON'T comprehend this God – He transcends us.

We read it at the start today: (Psalm 29) "Everything in His Temple says 'Glory!'" It's all beyond us; all significant beyond what we could describe, more important than the upcoming elections in the US; more significant than your recent diagnosis or your child's rebellion or the price of eggs.

A.W. Tozer in his modern classic called *Knowledge of the Holy* asked his readers to think of a small caterpillar and then to think of the angels of God (there's an angel in *The Revelation* that has one foot in the middle of the sea and another on the land – that's a big angel). If we could measure the essential difference between these two created beings – maybe we'd put the caterpillar on the ground and the Archangel on top of the bank-building.

Well, where would we locate God? Would He be above the building... out of this atmosphere? On the moon... the sun (92M miles away)? Further? NO... He's infinitely higher. THEY are created... ALL things are created... He alone is uncreated – infinite, eternal and unchangeable. He's as present right here as He is 1,000 light years from earth. No wonder Solomon sees the dilemma and asks repeatedly, (as he does in the second paragraph, v. 27), "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!"

And let me ask YOU – the worshipers here with us today: how much do you know and understand this God, infinite, eternal and unchangeable? Do you understand 10% of God? 5%? 1%? Do you see that it's ridiculous even to think in numbers. God is infinitely transcendent – above us.

And coincident to His transcendence, *Solomon's Temple is meant to communicate the immanence of Israel's God*. As with the tabernacle (the portable Temple they carried in the wilderness), so the Temple is right in their midst – the with-ness of God, God WITH us.

The building is a kind of model of Eden, full of earthy carvings, fruit, vines, flowers, palm-trees – all the features of real, substantial life, the familiar. The three chambers of the Temple – the outer-courts representing the earth and all the nations; the central chamber representing the visible heavens (the sky and the stars) and the inner, Holy of Holies representing Heaven.

It all communicates the nearness of God who created all things to share with us and not surrounds His worshipers with the stuff of earth like God walked with us NEAR TO US in the Garden in the cool of day. "A place for Your dwelling... My name shall BE there... May the LORD our God be with us..."

It's NOT that Solomon thought he was containing or caging God (like the pagan idols trapped and tamed the gods) but he sees the Temple as a sign and symbol of God's grace. God is saying, "Let My House constantly

remind you of the goal of My creation: 'That I will be your God and you will be My people...' Or as Jesus Christ would later teach us to pray, "On Earth as it is in Heaven..." – the destination toward which God's creation is moving: union of Heaven and Earth.

"I have claimed you to be Mine... My people... My Bride... My Body. So, the Temple is described as having side chambers but the word is "ribs" (6.5; 7.3 "It was paneled with cedar above the side chambers צלע -- tsela). The words "face" (6.3) and "shoulder" (6.8) are used of architectural features. The Temple is a Body made alive by God's Spirit who, in some way, LIVES in the Temple. One scholar suggests that the many different utensils stand for God's people who have different roles and functions in the Body – One Body with many members (Leithart, p. 58).

The Temple is telling the story of how God gave grace to Abraham and his descendants NOT because they were good or had something God wanted or needed -- just the opposite – THEY needed HIM. They were a very old barren couple. And this grace is really prominent in Solomon's prayer, that God's eyes would be open to this grace-house, *"Listen to the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; hear in heaven Your dwelling place; hear and forgive."* As if to say, the Temple reminds us: we began by Your grace and we'll remain by Your grace.

The Temple doesn't only point to God's glory... but (if we can even say this) that one aspect of God that He Himself finds most glorious i.e., His grace. So, St Paul writes to the Ephesians, the reason God rescues people from what they deserve is always "to the praise of the glory of His grace..." (Eph. 1.6) The Temple trumpets that to the world: "instead of incinerating these guilty, rebellious people – I show them grace – I came near to dwell among them, to allure them with beauty, truth and goodness, to put their guilt on Another... So, every time they use this Temple, and see the sacrifices they'll think, *"The animal dies in my place."*

Until finally all those sacrificial animals – *"all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain"*, all pointed to the One Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. He will be presented at the Temple in His infancy. He will meet His true Father in the Temple when He was 12 years old. He will rescue the Temple when it was divorced from its true purpose (John 2 : NOT a place of transaction and commerce – NOT a robbers' den but God meant it to be a house of prayer for all people (REMEMBER: it was Gentiles who provided the building materials! [see 5.1-10]).

When God came near to us, "Immanuel, God with us" – when the invisible God APPEARED; when the infinite, eternal, unchangeable God became most immanent and relatable, knowable and close – not only did all the symbolic sacrifices made in the Temple for centuries – not only did they finally have SUBSTANCE in the Sacrifice to end ALL SACRIFICES... but He, Jesus Christ, claimed to BE the true Temple.

Right after He made a whip and drove out the religious-emporium clowns – they asked Him on what authority He did these things and He said, *"You want a sign? Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up... But He was speaking of the Temple of His body. So, when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this..."* (John 2.18ff)

The Temple made of stone and cedar and gold showed by all those sacrifices – rivers of blood – innocent animals standing in for guilty people – the Temple showed that God was too holy and above us to act like

human cruelty and selfishness and our universal rejection of God didn't really matter so let's just forget about it... NOPE! Those sacrifices showed that God is deadly serious about sin. There WILL be blood.

AND that God is so loving and full of grace that He would make a way to fix what we could not. In Jesus Christ we have the True Locus, the Holy Place, the site where transcendence and immanence meet. God infinitely Holy and above us comes intimately near us. He becomes the Temple. He becomes the Sacrifice, the remedy for our rebellion.

"Where IS God, Mommy?" "Well, sweetheart, He's infinitely above us AND He's so close that He became one of us. He put skin on (as Bill Iverson used to say) and He did that to communicate the glory of His grace...

But mommy and daddy... grandma, grandpa, uncles and aunts, neighbors and coworkers: be sure to add THIS – *"For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite"* (Isa. 57.17)

God is saying to humanity – "Live before Me in brokenness and trust – humility and rest. And I will make My presence known to you and I will live IN YOU." We don't say, "Well, God is immanent – He's my good Buddy, the Man upstairs (a projection of my grandfather)". Nor do we say, "God is so far above us that how could anyone be so arrogant as to say he/she knows God – how egotistical can you be?!"

No... in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Transcendent God *"whose Name is holy"* becomes fully present and near. He comes to display God's darling attribute, the core of the Story, God's Grace!

He's the Perfect Paradox. Peter, James and John stood on the mountain with Him and ON this real flesh and blood fully Human Being – born of a woman with all that entails – ON Him comes that cloud of brightness (Matt 17.2) *"His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light."* He is the essence of significance – the fullness of deity – clothed in the light of "kabōd" (heavy-light)... And He is the Temple that communicates grace.

And in Him God is saying, "If you want to know Me as I really AM – transcendent and immanent – different yet become ONE with you – come into this Temple..." And the way to do it is just to fall, to see your need, your sin, your guilt and shortcomings and hide in this Temple, the place where it IS *"ON EARTH as it is in HEAVEN"* – He is where God lives and everyone who mourns finds life IN THIS LIVING TEMPLE.

To live in Him is to be prayerful (remember this was Solomon's prayer). Prayerless people are self-dependent people. They close the door to the Humble God. You will live in wonder – wanting to sing and muse on these mysteries – things like "heavy light" and big grace for big sinners.

You will live in joy – God is with me! He's forgiven and accepted me. He came near to rescue me. I've known grace and I've begun to know the incomprehensible One... not by arrogantly asserting that, "I figured it out – why can't YOU?!" but instead asserting, "I was so broken that God had to humble Himself and come for me! Yes, I live in joy!"

And we will want to live for God's glory – we'll want others to be recipients of this grace that God loves to display... We want God's grace to be immanent/visible/known!

We'll be builders with Solomon, this time building a Temple not out of stone but out of flesh – many members in one Body – joined to the Cornerstone; living stones from every tribe, nation, people and tongue, broken jars where God loves to dwell.

Q U O T E S

Working on a building, a Holy Ghost building
For my Lord, for my Lord
If I was a drunkard I tell you what I'd do
I would quit my drinking and work on that building too

Working on a building, a Holy Ghost building
For my Lord, yeah for my Lord
If I was a liar I tell you what I'd do
I would quit my lying and work on that building too

Working on a building, it's a Holy Ghost building
For my Lord, yeah for my Lord

Working on a building, it's a Holy Ghost building
For my Lord, yeah for my Lord
If I was a singer I tell you what I'd do
I would keep on singing and work on that building too

– Cindy Morgan, (Traditional), “Workin’ On a Building” from
the 1988 album, *The Trinity Sessions*, by Cowboy Junkies

The very centre and core of the whole Bible is the doctrine of the grace of God—the grace of God which depends not one whit upon anything that is in man, but is absolutely undeserved, resistless and sovereign. The theologians of the Church can be placed in an ascending scale according as they have grasped with less or greater clearness that one great central doctrine, that doctrine that gives consistency to all the rest; and Christian experience also depends for its depth and for its power upon the way in which that blessed doctrine is cherished in the depths of the heart. The centre of the Bible, and the centre of Christianity, is found in the grace of God; and the necessary corollary of the grace of God is salvation through faith alone.

- J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (1925)