

4. Faithful God, Fickle People - Solomon's Glory and Disgrace: Building for God

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[0 : 00] So, 1 Kings chapter 6, and I've called this Building for God. One of the great temptations of a church, especially of the established churches, such as the churches in Scotland and England, is to become a branch of the heritage industry.

As they see their impacts lessened, as they find their numbers dwindling, as they see themselves increasingly irrelevant, then they become caretakers of beautiful buildings, buildings such as Westminster Abbey, such as Durham Cathedral, very beautiful building indeed, which we used to see from our window every morning, looking particularly magnificent as the sun rose behind it. And the danger of that is that the church then is presented as something that belongs to the past, something that is tied up with a way of life that is gone, something that we look at in the way that we look at, say, an old castle or some other ancient building, and no longer has any real relevance to us today.

So, what is the significance of the temple? Long chapters are given to this building here and in 1 and 2 Chronicles, and indeed, in 1 Kings chapters 5 to 8 of Solomon's story is concerned with this. And yet it does seem rather tedious. Few people, I imagine, read these chapters and find themselves filled with wonder, love and praise. Few people would mention these as their favorite parts of Scripture, and yet the Spirit has decided to give us this detail and decided to tell us how and why and where and when Solomon had this building made.

[1 : 52] If you glance back at chapter 5, verse 5, so that we can get our bearings through this chapter. Chapter 5, verse 5. In other words, it's not just a building.

This is reflecting the covenant of God, reflecting the promises of God, and anticipating the kingdom that is to come. So, we're not simply dealing with the heritage industry.

We're not dealing with... This is not like... And indeed, some conservative commentators go down this road as well. One commentator of impeccably evangelical credentials says, these chapters read like a guidebook you might pick up in a cathedral or somewhere.

Wow, that's really going to help us to evangelize the city, is it not? That's really going to set our hearts on fire. But what is then the significance of the detail?

It seems to me this description reflects God's own splendor. One thing you have to notice, both in the building of the temple and the tabernacle back in Exodus, is that in very many ways they model the days of creation.

[3 : 17] Their beauty, their color, very much follows that. This is something that is made for God's name. And of course, all our work for God should reflect that.

Not just simply the building project that's nearly its completion in Buchanan Street, which of course, since it's been drenched with prayer, and since it's been conceived, so that it will help us as we carry out this task of bringing the gospel to people, is part of our work for God.

It's our daily work for God, our daily walk with God. What we do all the days of our life. In other words, it's not just about building buildings. It's about building godliness into our lives.

There is a right kind of professionalism that brings glory to God. Some Christians are so super spiritual that they think that sloppiness brings glory to God.

It doesn't. Well, that's one of the things these chapters are telling us. Now, that's all very well. But what are we going to make? How should we read these chapters?

[4 : 23] What is the Lord saying to us in them? How do we find spiritual meat there, not just assurance that it's significant? There's one thing to say something is significant, but the next question, obviously, is what is its significance?

Something's not significant simply because we say it's significant. I want to suggest this chapter is telling us three things of what the temple is about.

First of all, there is a date to celebrate. This is verse 1, and then this theme is picked up in verses 37 to 38.

A date to celebrate. In the 480th year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt. The building of this temple is dated in relation to the greatest event in Israel's calendar, the exodus from Egypt, where God saved his people, where God began to build up his people as a kingdom of priests.

So you see what our author is saying. The first thing to notice about this temple is it's not just a building. It celebrates the creation, the new creation of God's people as a kingdom of priests.

[5 : 37] Indeed, it goes back further still. We've noticed over and over again the links with Abraham. In Genesis 15, 13, the great story of God's covenant with Abraham, we are told that the people of Israel would be in a land that was not their own for some 400 years, a round figure of 400 years.

There is a date to celebrate, and this date shows that everything depends on God's salvation. The book of Exodus tells us how God saved his people, how God gave them his word, and how he told them to build a tabernacle or a tent so that he could live among them.

Now that goes back further still. Why did God want to live among his people? Why does God still want to live among his people? Surely that goes back further on Exodus.

It goes back right to Genesis, to the original creation when God walked among his people. This is Eden in the fallen world, if you like.

There is a way back to God. At the end of Genesis 3, at the end of the fall story, the flaming sword and the cherubim guard the way back to the tree of life.

[6 : 56] But there is a way back. First of all, shown in the tabernacle, and now in the temple. And the temple is built on the same plan as the tabernacle. It's larger, but you've got the same plan.

There are three courts. There is the outer court, or courts. There is the inner court, and then the most holy place. And we'll come back to that later on. So it celebrates the end of desert wanderings and the bringing of rest.

A date to celebrate. But it's also, from the vantage point of the author, a date which is midway between Exodus and exile.

These are the two big points around which Israel's history revolved in the Old Testament. Saved from Egypt, and then some 800 years later, taken captive to Babylon.

But everything seems to be undone. Remember, if you read to the end of 2 Kings, our author is writing when the exile has already happened. Reminding us that this temple is only ever provisional.

[8 : 07] It's not God's final dwelling place. It's not God's final resting place. And notice at the end in verse 37, in the fourth year, the foundation was laid.

In the eleventh year, it was finished. He was seven years in building it. Now, as we've gone through this story of Solomon, what I've tried to say is that essentially Solomon's story is a story of somebody who was given great wisdom, who did many great things, but right from the beginning, there are little warning bells.

Look at chapter 7, verse 1. Clearly, he was seven years in building it. Solomon was building his own house for 13 years.

Now, surely our author is drawing us up and saying, wait a minute, what's happening here? See, Solomon's temple would not dominate the city of Jerusalem in the way that, say, York Minster dominates York or Durham Cathedral dominates Durham.

It would be part of a complex of other buildings, including royal buildings. And when we come to chapter 11 in a few weeks' time, we'll see what Solomon does with that complex.

[9 : 26] He builds other chapels for his foreign wives and their gods. You see, Solomon's behaving almost as if Yahweh, the Lord, is his tenant, rather than Solomon being the tenant.

It seems to me that when he builds this temple and makes it into what is essentially a royal chapel, that he's opening the door, making it easier to do what he does in chapter 11.

You see, there are warning bells ringing here as well. What he did was good. What he did was right. But as so often, as we've noticed before, there are question marks.

So, as we think of this, we need to celebrate our salvation. That's what the Exodus is about. The Exodus points forward to the greater Exodus. The Exodus of the dying and rising again of our Lord

Jesus Christ that rescues his people from slavery and brings them and opens the kingdom of heaven to them.

We need to celebrate that. We need to look back to it. But we also need to guard our present and our future. So, that's the first thing. What is the temple about?

[10:37] It's about a date to celebrate. The date when the Lord rescued us. But secondly, there's a word to obey. Verses 11 to 13. Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon.

Now, anybody reading this chapter can see perfectly well, this is an intrusion into the chapter. It breaks the flow of the chapter. And it deliberately breaks the flow of the chapter.

Say, wait a minute. What is this project about? Why are you building this temple? And it's a deliberate reminder that without the living word of God, the temple becomes an empty shell.

The temple does not glorify God unless Solomon walks in statutes, obeys rules, and keeps commandments which the Lord spoke to David, his father.

In other words, unless the word of the Lord is at the center of this, it's simply a building project. And there is a salutary story later on in 2 Kings.

[11:42] Read it later on. The story of King Joash in 2 Kings 11 and 12 who decided the temple wasn't a bit of a mess. It needed to be repaired.

It needed to be revamped. And we have the story of how he did that. And the story is totally dismal. Its silences are deafening.

There is no mention of prayer. There is no mention of the word of God. There is no mention of Joash's heart being moved. What is it? It is simply a building project.

And you see, when a church does that, that becomes disastrous, doesn't it? Like those buildings have thermometers outside them to show how unhealthy they are. The church is a bit of a mess.

We need to beautify it.

That's not what building for God means. Building for God happens when the word of God is unleashed. And of course, there is no one-to-one comparison between the temple and any of our buildings.

[12:41] Remember, there was only one temple, which was the place where God placed his name. In the New Dispensation, there are many buildings which are dedicated to the praise and to the glory of God.

But we are reminded that such places are only living gospel churches if the word of God is unleashed there. The promise to David.

That's the very heart of it. The word I spoke to David, your father. Wonderful passage in 2 Samuel 7, where Nathan the prophet tells David about the covenant.

You may remember David had decided he wanted to build a temple. I want to build a house for the Lord. And first of all, Nathan agreed. And then Nathan came to David and said afterwards, the Lord doesn't want you to build a house for him.

He's going to build a house for you. And there's a wonderful play on the two meanings of house.

The Lord doesn't want you to build a house in the sense of temple. He's going to build you a house in the sense of a dynasty of new people who will follow after you.

[13:48] And there already we have anticipated, surely, what we read in 1 Peter about the living stones built into the temple, which will one day be for the glory of God.

Obedience is the key to blessing. God will keep his part of the agreement. We need to keep it as well. So the house depends on faithfulness to the word.

And there was to come a day when that house was to become an idolatrous shrine, no longer glorifying to God. We have many examples in the Psalms, notably Psalm 24, of what are sometimes called entrance liturgies, which people sang as they would make their way up the hill of Zion to the temple.

Psalm 24, Who will ascend the hill of the Lord, and who will dwell in his holy place, who has clean hands and a pure heart. As the pilgrims went up to the temple, they were often greeted by that liturgy sung by the priests.

But one day, instead of an entrance liturgy, there was old Jeremiah in full flight. Do not say that this place is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

[14:59] Because it had no longer been the temple of the Lord. The word of God was no longer honored. The word of God was no longer obeyed. And therefore, it had become an idolatrous shrine.

You see, without the word, all else is an expensive waste of time. As I say, when we build for God, whether it's building fabric or building in our own lives, it must be driven by the word of God. It must be drenched in prayer. I mentioned Joash a minute or two ago, who did none of those things. But read on towards the end of the story, in 2 Kings 23, the great reform of Josiah, which was energized by the word, the discovery, and the reinstatement of the word of the Lord. All over our cities and towns, there are garages and blocks of flats, where once the living word of God was preached. But because the word of God ceased to be preached, then these places simply became empty shelves.

So there's not only a date to celebrate, there's a word to obey. And thirdly, this is verse 19, that the temple is a place to meet with God.

[16:17] Verse 19, the inner sanctuary he prepared in the innermost part of the house to set there the ark of the covenant of the Lord. That's what the temple was about, about the ark of the covenant.

When we look in a few weeks' time at chapter 8, at the great dedication of the temple, we find the ark is given central place, because the ark contained the tablets of the law, the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, reminding us that we meet God when we hear his word, when we listen to his word, and when we obey it.

Now where is the ark of the covenant now? It's gone, obviously. It was almost certainly destroyed when the Babylonian army set Jerusalem and destroyed and burned the temple.

When the people returned from exile, in the book of Ezra, you read about a list of temple vessels that were returned, but the ark of the covenant was not among them.

And surely the reason for that was because the ark of the covenant, no more than the temple, was the presence of God in itself.

[17:28] It symbolized it, but when it became an idol, it needed to be destroyed. The temple was rebuilt after the exile. The temple was destroyed again in AD 70, but there was no ark there.

And the reason for this is that the ark pointed to Christ. Read the first chapter of Ezekiel. When Ezekiel has his great vision in Babylon, when he's in great gloom and in great despair about what's happening to his people, what will happen to the temple and to the city, he sees in the sky what is in essence a portable ark of the covenant, the presence of Yahweh, outside of Israel in the city of Babylon.

In other words, the ark no longer confined to Jerusalem, no longer confined to the temple, but everywhere, because one day it's going to take flesh.

One day the true ark of the covenant is going to appear in human form. The ark, we are told in Exodus, was the location of the glory, the visible outshining of God's presence.

What does John tell us? The word became flesh and lived among us and we saw his glory. The true ark of the covenant. As William Cooper says, in Jesus, where'er your people meet, there they behold your mercy seat.

[18:56] Where'er they seek you, you are found and every place is holy ground. No longer holy buildings, no longer holy places, but since Jesus suffered outside the sacred enclosure, the whole world, as Isaiah said, is filled with his glory.

So what was the temple for? The temple was an object lesson of the dwelling of God among his people, reminding them that long before, in the state of innocence, God had walked in the Garden of Eden with his people, reminding them that Moses had created the tabernacle where God was to meet with his people, reminding them that they had to come to him with sacrifice, remembering his deliverance and listening to his word, but also leading them beyond it to the world to come where God would be with his people, not only temporarily, but forever.

So what are we to say then about all this? First of all, I think we need to say that our best must be given to God. This is not the old religion of good works, but this is saying that when we give to God, whether it's building, whether it's in our lives, whatever we do must be the best we can do and the best we can be as a response to his wonderful grace.

But we must also remember, secondly, the provisional and limited nature of that best. Remember what Jesus says, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

We do not build the church. He builds the church. That will go on. That will go on in times of deadness as well as in times of revival. That will go on in times of complacent apathy as well as in times of spiritual life in every circumstance.

[21 : 00] And as we are part of that great movement of God, we need to be on our knees at the cross. That's the point of the date to celebrate, surely, isn't it? The day of Calvary.

We must come to him in repentance, depending on his grace. His word must be in our hearts as well as on our lips. Because in time, we are building, but we are building for eternity.

As we finish, let me read the little part of the end of the story. John says, And I saw no temple in the city. For its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb.

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it. For the glory of God gives it its light and its lamp as the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

And its gates will never be shut by day. And there will be no night there. They will bring into it the honour and glory of the nations. That is the future and that is what the temple in its day was about.

[22 : 14] Let's pray. Father, we praise you for calling us into that temple, making us living stones into that great building that one day will shine with all the glory of God and of the Lamb.

And in the tangle and turmoil and often messiness of our lives, help us to keep in view that great and that wonderful prospect, that gospel which cannot be thwarted and that prospect which can never be set aside.

So we praise you for this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the living word, the ark of the covenant, to whom the temple pointed. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.