

5. Faithful God, Fickle People - Solomon's Glory and Disgrace: Heaven meeting Earth

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[0 : 00] Now, if you would have 1 Kings 8 open in front of you, please, and we'll have a moment of prayer. Come then, with prayer and contemplation, see how in Scripture Christ is known.

Father, no human words can bring out the fullness of the Lord Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture. And so I pray that you will take my human words in all their weakness and imperfection, that you will use them faithfully to expound the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

And this evening we come to number five of this short series in the life of Solomon, which I've called Faithful God, Fickle People, Solomon's Glory and Disgrace, and we come really to the high watermark of Solomon's spirituality in this chapter.

When I was a child, I didn't want to go to heaven. One of the reasons I didn't want to go to heaven, because I was told it was like being in church. Now, tell a child that they are going to be in church singing hymns for all eternity, and that's likely to be a big turn-off.

You can imagine how delighted I was when a preacher read in Revelation 21-23, I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb.

[1 : 47] And I realized, not then, but I realized gradually as I read scripture and listened to it, that the idea of heaven, the idea of temple, the idea of singing, the idea of choir, which is very important, was only one of the many pictures throughout scripture of the world to come.

And I realized it was only a picture. Of course there will be singing and praising God in heaven. It would be a poor place if it weren't. We will indeed, as we all sing at the end, be lost in wonder, love and praise.

But that's only one of the pictures of God dwelling with his people. But what we've got to ask ourselves then, when we read a passage like this, is why is there so much in the Bible about temple, and before that about tabernacle?

From the middle of Exodus right on to about the middle of Numbers, all the emphasis is on the tabernacle in the desert, the tent and its furnishings. Then you read here in 1 Kings, these long chapters 6 to 8, which focus on temple.

There's even more in 1 and 2 Chronicles. And then read the prophet Ezekiel, who sees the new heaven and the new earth under the picture of temple in chapters 40 to 48.

[3 : 06] How are we going to understand it, and how are we going to listen to what God is saying to us in it? The commentators are very little help, because they tend to go through all the details and tell us exactly how all the pieces fitted together.

If you're interested in DIY, that might be extremely interesting, but it's not exactly spiritual nourishment. It doesn't exactly fill you with joy and with rapture. But I think we begin to understand it, we go right back to the beginning of our Bibles and to God's original purpose for humanity.

When God created a universe, he put in that Adam and Eve. But he didn't, as it were, make them tenants of the whole universe. He created a garden in Eden, and we are told that he met with them and walked with them.

So right from the very beginning, it was God's desire to meet his people, and he met them in the Garden of Eden. As we know, the fall happened, and they were driven out of that garden, and the way back to the tree of life was barred.

The cherubim and the flaming sword made it impossible for them to return. So what does God do then? In the fallen world, he creates an Eden. He creates a place.

[4 : 26] He creates a sanctuary where his people can meet him. And that's what Exodus 25 verse 8 says. God said to Moses, build a sanctuary where I may meet with my people.

And that's the point. God, in other words, God is doing in the fallen world what he originally intended that he would do. And he is going to do it in spite of sin, in spite of Satan.

He is going to meet with his people. So the temple is a place where heaven meets earth. It's our title for this evening, Heaven Meeting Earth.

Until we come to that glorious chapter in Revelation, which I've referred to already, the dwelling of God is with humans. The temple is about God meeting with us, and us meeting with God.

Heaven meeting earth. This, as I say, is the high watermark of Solomon's story. If you were at the earlier series, you would remember that I pointed out how there are warning signs throughout Solomon's early life, marrying the pharaoh's daughter, leaving the high places, the multiplying of horses, the extravagance of his court, and so on.

[5 : 40] Would he have stayed where he was in chapter 8? Sadly, as we are going to see in chapter 11 next week, he did not stay there. Had he done so, his own history, and indeed the future history of his people, would be very different.

So what is this chapter saying to us? I want to suggest to you that there are three particular aspects of temple here in this great prayer of dedication. Three ways in which heaven meets earth.

The first thing that the temple shows, and the prayer of dedication shows, is a true obedience to the word of God. Now let me show what I mean.

Verse 2. All the men of Israel, assemble to King Solomon the feast in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month. The feast, the festival, is almost certainly tabernacles, or Sukkoth as it's called sometimes.

The feast which remembers the desert wanderings. Remembering, in other words, the total dependence on God and on his word. So that's the first hint of what's happening here.

[6 : 45] They come to celebrate that time when they were totally dependent on the word of God, remembering the place where God gave them that word. But especially, I want you to notice verse 6 and following.

Then the priest brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. For the cherubim spread out their wings over the ark, so that the cherubim overshadowed the ark and its poles.

And then verse 9. There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses put there at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the people of Israel, and they came out of the land of Egypt.

What was in that ark of the covenant? The two tablets of stone, the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, the very heart of God's word to the people.

So at the very heart of the temple was the ark of the covenant, and in the ark of the covenant was the word of God. Because without that word, the most beautiful buildings, the most magnificent ritual and liturgy, is simply an empty shell.

[7 : 56] I mentioned already, if you read in 2 Kings 11 and 12, you will find how King Joash made an abortive attempt to do something about the temple.

I'm deliberately choosing the phrase there, do something about the temple. Read the story of Joash's attempt to repair the temple, and look at what's not there. Now I know you can't build arguments on silence, but those silences are positively deafening.

Nowhere does Joash pray. Nowhere does Joash open the word of God. Nowhere does Joash summon people to repentance. It's simply a fabric project.

It's in a bit of a mess, so we'd better repair it. Now that is not meeting God in his temple. That is simply a fabric job.

By contrast, towards the end of 2 Kings, Josiah, young King Josiah, in chapter 23 of 2 Kings, his great reformation springs as he gathers the people in the temple to hear the word of God.

[9 : 04] The ark is the place of revelation. But also the ark points to the living word. When we hear the word of God, we are never simply teaching the Bible.

We are never simply explaining a passage. We are proclaiming Christ. And if we're not proclaiming Christ, then we are simply playing with words. I was browsing through Wesley Owen the other day, and I picked a book off the shelf.

Where is the ark of the covenant today? And other questions. And I thought, what a useless book. We know where the ark of the covenant is today.

It's in heaven. We have a great high priest who has gone into heaven. Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus is the true ark of the covenant. Because in him dwells the glory of God.

He is the one to whom the ark of the covenant pointed. Almost certainly, the ark would be destroyed when the Babylonian armies overthrew Jerusalem and set and burned the temple at the time of the exile.

[10 : 16] And God is showing his people there is no longer any need for a portable box. Because the ark is going to take flesh. Read Ezekiel chapter 1.

Ask yourself what Ezekiel saw. What the sweet chariot that was coming to carry him home was. This was a portable ark of the covenant. He saw above the plains of Babylon.

Teaching him that Yahweh God of Israel was alive and well in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. See how in scripture, as we sang, Christ is known.

This is about Christ. This is not antiquarian stuff about an old building. This is about the living word of God. So the first thing that happens when we look at the temple is we learn a true understanding and a true obedience and a true submission to the word of God.

And without that, all our buildings, all our efforts, all our work are alike in vain. That must be the engine. That must be the driving force of all we do, whether it's our building project or anything else we do.

[11 : 24] All these, of course, can be and often are done for the glory of God. But the point is to show Christ so that people will meet him in his word.

Where do we meet Christ? We meet him in his word. And we believe that as the word of God is unfolded, the living Christ comes to people. In a way we cannot understand.

In a way that we cannot fully grasp. See how in scripture Christ is known. Well, the second thing about temple here is that Solomon here shows a true understanding of God's covenant.

Once again, verse 9, the Lord made a covenant with the people of Israel when they came out of the land of Egypt. We've noticed how the Solomon story has always been linked with earlier parts of the story.

A few weeks ago we saw how it was linked with the Abraham story. Solomon's splendor as he reigned in the lands between the Nile and the Euphrates. What a partial fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

[12 : 26] And now, here is a link with Moses himself and with the earlier covenant. We see especially verses 15 and 16.

Where the covenant with Moses is followed by the covenant with David. That's 2 Samuel 7 if you want to read it later. Well, let's read verses 12 and the next few verses.

Then Solomon said, The Lord has said he would dwell in thick darkness. I have indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever. Then the king turned around and blessed all the assembly of Israel while the assembly of Israel stood.

And he said, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised. With his mouth to David my father, saying, This day I brought, since the day I brought my people Israel out of Egypt.

I chose no city, but I chose David. See how the whole story is linked together. Just as the Lord had chosen Moses, now he chooses David. And you'll probably remember it was David who wanted to build the temple, first of all.

[13 : 33] Back in 2 Samuel 7, he says to Nathan the prophet that he wanted to build a house for the Lord. If you read that chapter, there's a wonderful play on the word house.

Nathan says to David, No David, you're not going to build a house for God. He's going to build a house for you. You're not going to build a house in the sense of temple. He's going to build a house in the sense of dynasty.

In the sense of descendants. And this is these wonderful words of the grace of God. But the Lord, verse 18, said to David my father, Whereas it was in your heart to build a house for my name, you did well that it was in your heart.

The Lord who knows our hearts, even when we don't get it right, knows the sincerity that was there.

Rather like what one of the Narnia characters says, It is the courtesy of deep heaven, that when we mean well, he takes us to have meant better than we did.

[14 : 36] That is God. That is God's gracious covenant. He takes us to have meant better than we did. So the covenant fits into the story.

Fits into the fickle people and into the story of the faithful God. Now notice that covenant is totally God given. Verse 22.

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, spread out his hands towards heaven and said, O Lord God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth being keeping covenant and showing steadfast love.

This great covenant word, heseth, the love of the covenant, which never fails. If you read anything about the pagan gods, if, for example, you read Homer's Iliad about the Greek gods, the Greek gods are fickle.

They are capricious. They go on the huff. They bear grudges. You can never be sure how well you'll be accepted by them. But this is not the case with this God.

[15 : 38] This God is totally dependent. And because he's faithful in the past, we can trust him in the future. The hymn says, we'll praise him for all that is past and trust him for all that's to come.

He is a faithful God, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love. But notice the other part of the phrase, who walk before you with all their heart.

So we'll see next week in chapter 11, walk before you with all their heart, is such a significant phrase, because that's what Solomon himself failed to do. In the verses, we didn't have time to read verses 31 to 53.

These are the covenant curses. There are blessings for obedience, but there are curses for disobedience. And these come straight from Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

These are the warnings. Keep the covenant, there will be blessing. Disobey the covenant, there will be cursing. Now remember what blessing and cursing means.

[16 : 42] The word blessed throughout scripture. I'm never very, very pleased with it being translated happy, because happiness is a feeling which comes and goes.

You can be utterly miserable and still blessed, because blessed is a word about what God has done for you and will do for you. And so is cursed.

The word woe, which often is the sign of a curse in scripture, means that however successful you may be at the moment, unless you return to God, there is going to be nothing but judgment.

So this is applicable to us today. We have a totally faithful God. But so often we are a fickle people. The covenant, let me put it this way, the covenant depends totally on God.

But for us to enjoy that covenant, we need to respond to it. Because the covenant is essentially a marriage. There's no point in being married to somebody and then walking away and forgetting all about them.

[17 : 42] And that's what so often happens with God's covenant. God's people who are married to him live as if they're not married to him. And Solomon is going to do that himself later on, sadly.

So we have a true understanding of the word of God. We have a true understanding of God's covenant. But thirdly, we have a true understanding of God himself, who God is.

Because above all, the temple is a revelation of the nature of God. And it's particularly verses 27 to 30, which are crucial for understanding this.

This is the high watermark of Solomon's spirituality, as I said. Solomon grasps here and expresses memorably the twin truths of the God of the Bible.

Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold heaven, and the highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built.

[18 : 40] This revelation set out for us at the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1 and 2 and developed throughout the rest of Scripture. So who is this God?

First of all, we need to have a sense of awe. Will God indeed dwell on earth? Behold heaven, and the highest heaven cannot contain you. The sheer mystery of God, the thick darkness in which he dwells, the impossibility of putting him in a box.

Not only the temple, the whole universe is too small. Language bursts its banks here. Theology, our theology cannot explain this because this is the God who is greater and bigger and vaster than we can possibly imagine.

Oh, come let us worship and fall down before the Lord, our Maker. And the question that arises is do we fear God in this way? Are our thoughts of God worthy thoughts?

Or are they trivial? And of course, as we think of this, then a fear begins to grip us and perhaps the wrong kind of fear. If that's all the truth about God, and that's essentially the truth that's revealed in Genesis 1, this awesome God who speaks and without any effort the whole universe bursts into abundant and wonderful life.

[20 : 08] How can we possibly relate to a God like that? My thoughts are not your thoughts, says Isaiah, nor my ways your ways. As the heavens are high above the earth, so are my thoughts above yours, my ways above yours.

Look at verse 30. Listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place and listen in heaven your dwelling place and when you hear, forgive.

See, verse 30 gives us the balancing truth and that is the nearness and the intimacy of God. He is up there but he is also down here and that is the truth that's particularly revealed as I've said in Genesis 2 when he creates a garden in Eden and comes down there to meet with his people, to speak to them, to bless them.

So while he is awesome, we can engage with him because of his grace. Eden and the temple were sacraments of his presence.

Since we are human, since we are bound in the twin categories of time and space, we need places where we can meet him. See, to say that God is everywhere is more often than not an excuse to avoid him anywhere.

[21 : 29] And this God, while he does not live in the temple, indeed he is so great he doesn't even live in the highest heavens, this God, Solomon believes, will actually listen in heaven, his dwelling place, as they pray towards this place.

In a way that cannot be quite understood but is nevertheless real, this God is willing to come down and meet his people and surely there is the gospel.

The gospel of the one who is one with God but who became one of us. The one in the form of God who took the form of a servant.

Quote Narnia yet again, once in our world there was a stable which had something in it that was bigger than the whole world. And there is the wonder of the coming down of God.

He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all and his shelter was a cradle. That is the God who revealed himself to Solomon in the temple and that is the God who comes to us now.

[22 : 37] Verse 28, Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house the place of which you have said my name shall be there.

And God in New Testament times has placed his name in his temple because God's temple are God's children who are called by his name.

No longer are buildings no longer are places the temple. We are the temple in spite of our fickleness we are the dwelling place of the spirit. We are the place where God comes to us the place where God meets with us.

This is the rich this is a great chapter. As I finish let me just say two things. First of all if we are God's temple then what is true about this ancient temple must be even more true about us.

We must be the people among whom the word of God is heard who meet around the word of God to hear that word and to be led by that word to the living Christ himself.

[23 : 52] We must be those who with all our hearts obey that covenant that covenant we couldn't earn that covenant which is given to us by grace we need to respond to it through grace and we need to be the people who have this true sense of God if he's only up there across leagues of super space our relationship with him will become formal and distant we'll never share that with anyone on the other hand if he's simply down here he becomes the vulnerable God beloved of many modern theologians we're not sure if he can deliver the goods so we are God's temple that's what scripture is saying and giving us the challenge but secondly the true temple is only to be found in Christ himself the physical ark of the covenant as I said is long gone destroyed and disappeared I know there's all kinds of theories about it still being under the temple mount and people like Stephen Silber will no doubt continue making films about it but the important thing is the true ark of the covenant is in heaven great high priest who has gone into heaven by the power of his blood gone into heaven for us guarantee that because he is there we will be there as we sang a moment or two ago raise our hymns in the eternal temple that's what I believe 1 Kings 8 is saying to us may God bless his word let's pray you also as living stones are built up to be a temple to sing the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light father help us to be more truly your temple on earth trusting totally and absolutely in the great high priest who has gone through the curtain and by the power of his blood and by the power of his endless life stands there before your presence as a guarantee that we will be there as well and we praise you for this in his name

Amen