

25 August 2024

Solomon's Prayer
1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30

We learned several weeks ago that David was not permitted to build a temple to God, but that his son would. In the book of 1 Kings, that took place. And when the great temple built by King Solomon was completed, the king himself blessed it with a prayer. We read excerpts from that prayer today: 1 Kings 8:22-24 and 27-30:

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³He said, 'O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand.

²⁷'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! ²⁸Have regard to your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; ²⁹that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there", that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. ³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling-place; heed and forgive.'

It's been a full month since I talked about David's plan to build a temple to God, so let me review that quickly. Once he was established on the throne of Israel, David thought he should honor God by building a permanent temple instead of the tent tabernacle that had been God's shrine since the Exodus. But God sent Nathan the prophet to tell him not to do it. God said, "Have I ever asked for that? No!" So last month we talked a bit about that. Why not? What's wrong with having a temple? I won't review it all, but among the things we mentioned was that sometimes people start to think that the temple is where God is – and *only* there. As if a temple were a box that contained God, a place we could go visit God when we felt like it. In addition, sometimes people get confused about which one they're worshiping and start showing more reverence for the building than for the God it's supposed to serve. So there *are* problems with temples. In the end, though, we said that even though God doesn't need a temple, we kind of do. As a species we have chronic Attention Deficit Disorder when it comes to God, and we need something solid, visible, and tangible to drag our wandering minds back. God seemed to acknowledge that, too, because after telling David not to build a temple, God said, "But one of your sons will."

That's brings us to today's text. Solomon, son of David and Bathsheba, has become king after David, and his kingdom is one of the strongest and wealthiest in the Ancient Near East. Sure enough, Solomon sets about building a stunning temple, trimmed with gold and jewels and ivory and cedar and furnished with bronze pillars and carvings and equipped with golden plates and chalices and pitchers and you can read all the details in 1 Kings 4-7 if you like. When it's done, the priests bring the ark of the covenant into the temple, and the glory of God fills the courtyard while Solomon stands before the people and lifts his voice in prayer.

It is a great prayer. Solomon, like his father David before him, will decline over time in his faithfulness to God, but at this moment he prays sincerely, thoughtfully, and devotedly. Near the beginning of the prayer, he makes it very clear that God is bigger than the building. *But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!* Let no one think that God is confined to these precincts. So, if God is everywhere, why do we have a temple at all? It is to be a place set aside for prayer. Yes, we can pray anywhere; but will we? Yes, every moment of every day can be a time of prayer for us; but is it? Not usually. But when we come to God's temple, a place dedicated and consecrated for prayer, surrounded by others who have come here to pray, why then we might just actually do it. The rest of Solomon's prayer – which we will take some time with – is simply a listing of different times when the people might come to the temple to pray, and Solomon humbly asks that God will hear those prayers. *Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling-place; heed and forgive.*

First, Solomon says, *If someone sins against a neighbor, and is given an oath to swear, and comes and swears before your altar in this house, then hear in heaven and act.* This is a prayer for justice. When people sin against each other, they are to bring their dispute to the Lord to plead for God to act to requite the injured and to restore *shalom*. When you are angry, come pray.

Second, Solomon prays, *When your people Israel ... are defeated before an enemy but turn again to you, ... then hear in heaven, forgive ... and bring them again to the land that you gave their ancestors.* This is a prayer for restoration. When people do evil and bad things happen – and, make no mistake, they will – then the people are to return to the Lord and rest in their covenant relationship with God. When you are injured, come pray.

Third, Solomon says, *When heaven is shut up and there is no rain, ... then hear in heaven, and forgive ... and grant rain on your land.* This is a prayer for relief. When the hardships of this world befall the people, as they befall all humanity – God's people have no exemption – then they are to come to this place and lay their need before God, that God may respond with renewed life. When you are suffering, come pray.

Fourth, Solomon says, *If there is famine in the land, or any kind of plague or sickness, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, forgive, act, and render to all whose hearts you know.* This is a prayer for help and healing. When the people are hungry, physically or in any other way, they are to come to the Lord. When they are plagued, physically or in any other way, they are to come to the Lord and pray, that God may act on their behalf. When you are in need, come pray.

Fifth, Solomon prays, *When a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, ... then do according to all that the foreigner calls to you.* This is a prayer of acceptance, and I cannot stress how remarkable this fifth prayer is in the world of the Ancient Near East. The God of Israel is not a tribal deity, but God for all who cry out to him. Solomon says, “And even if someone who is not part of your covenant people comes to this house and prays, God listen to that stranger as you would listen to us.” Whoever you are, come pray.

Sixth, Solomon says, *If your people go out to battle, ... then hear in heaven their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause.* This is a prayer for victory. Yeah, I know. I thought about skipping this one, because I can't get excited about people calling on God to help them crush their enemies. It feels like there's been enough of that already. But not every victory is in

war, and not every endeavor involves fighting others. Some endeavors might involve beginning a social ministry for people with dementia, for instance. In any case, when the people have dreams and hopes, they are to bring those projects to God and ask for aid. When you seek help, come pray.

And finally, Solomon says, *If they sin against you*, and suffer the consequences of that sin, then come to the Lord in humility, then *forgive your people ... and grant them compassion in the sight of their captors*. And this, of course, is a prayer of repentance. When you have done wrong, come pray.

In other words, whatever your need, whatever your hunger, whatever your sin, whatever your pain, whatever your hope, and whoever you are, bring your prayer to God in the place consecrated as a temple to the Lord, and know in that place that you have been heard. This is why we need a temple. Not because God is more here than anywhere else, but because our prayers are more focused here. Yes, we can pray anywhere, but we pray better here. This is not the house of God; this is a house of prayer.

I have a high school friend named Kurt who, because of some questionable choices he made as a young adult, has ended up ... well, a Lutheran bishop. (I know, but what can you do?) Anyway, after eighteen years of bishoping, Kurt is writing a book on new models for the church, new metaphors to use that are appropriate for the church that we have now, instead of the church we hazily remember from the 1950s. Kurt's sending me that book chapter by chapter to read over for him, and one of his chapters is on seeing the church as the "Temple of the Holy Spirit." Much of this sermon has been based on that chapter, which begins that chapter with 1 Corinthians 3:16: *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?* The pronoun "you" in this verse is plural. Paul is speaking to the church as a group – in this case, a ragtag gathering of misfits, meeting in homes for worship in the rough port city of Corinth – saying, "You are God's temple, the dwelling place of God's Spirit."

And so are we. Not because we have a nice building, but because we gather to pray. In this assembly, we draw together the scattered prayers of the many and focus them. Here we pray the prayer for justice, the prayer for relief, the prayer for restoration, the prayer of repentance, the prayer for victory, the prayer for help and healing, and the prayer that reaches out to include those who are not part of our assembly. Solomon's prayer at that first temple was a reminder that we do not sanctify a temple with gold leaf or stained glass but with prayer. A temple is not a house of God but a gathering of people reaching for God. A temple is a house of prayer for all people. Let us pray.

O Lord, you do not dwell in this place any more than you dwell anywhere else, but in this place we gather, and when we gather, we cry out to you. Hear our prayers. When we call for justice in our city, our nation, and our world, hear us and act. When we cry in pain and humiliation, hear us and lift us up. When we ache with hunger or sickness, hear our prayers and restore us. When we sin against you and come to this place in tears, hear us and forgive. And if anyone, from any tribe or nation or faith, comes to this place to cry out to you, hear that prayer as well. Make this gathering, this assembly, this church a transmitter and amplifier of our cries to you. Hear our prayers, O Lord; incline your ears to our supplication. Amen.