

David #6 • Temple

In the previous talk we looked at the theme of faith, how (in stark contrast to King Saul) the young David exemplifies biblical faith.

We saw how David trusted God to help him carry out the tasks that God had given him to do, from shepherding to killing a giant.

And we concluded that as followers of Jesus, the 'greater David', we are called to emulate this faith, trusting that God will empower us to live lives that are purposeful and joyful.

And we do this by living in relationship with him, working with him at becoming the people he wants us to be, by doing the things that he wants us to do, as individuals and as a church community.

As we learned when we looked at covenant, and as today's reading confirms, one of David's greatest desires was to build a temple dedicated to God. Today we're going to take a look at this theme.

And to begin, we will travel back thirty five centuries to the Exodus, when God rescued the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

The Israelites have travelled from Egypt to Mount Sinai. We don't know the exact location of this mountain, but tradition situates it towards the tip of the Sinai Peninsula.

God has told Moses that he is going to appear to him and the Israelite people, to confirm to them that God wants Moses to be their leader.

Moses has warned the Israelites that something very big is about to happen, and God does not disappoint!

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on

it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

Exodus 19:16-18

The Israelites had been told to prepare themselves for this event, and to avoid contact with the mountain. This is not because of the thunder and lightning, but because it has become the location of God's holy presence.

Moses is given permission to meet with God. Moses climbs the mountain, and God gives him what we call the Ten Commandments.

Straight after this, we read...

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us or we will die.'

Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.'

The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

Exodus 20:18-21

The Israelites are terrified at this physical demonstration of God's raw power and presence. It must have been similar to being present at the eruption of a volcano, and seeing the molten lava rolling towards you.

And it raises the question, how is it possible for finite humans to relate to a God whose infinite power and pure 'differentness' from us is so overwhelming and even life-threatening?

God's preliminary answer to this is provided in the form of what we call the tabernacle.

God gave Moses the plans for its construction, which you can read about (in all their excruciating detail) in Exodus 25-40.

The purpose of the tabernacle was to provide a place where finite humans can meet with an infinite God. A portable Mount Sinai.

As the Israelites lived in tents on their journey from Egypt to Canaan, God chooses to symbolise living with them.

The word 'tabernacle' means 'to dwell', and the tabernacle was to be God's tent, appropriately situated in the centre of the Israelite camp.

The design specifications include imagery that mirror the garden of Eden, the place where God originally intended to dwell with humans. Like Eden, it faces east, it is 'guarded' by cherubim images, and the tree of life is represented by the tabernacle's lamp stand.

When the construction of the tabernacle is completed we read...

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

Exodus 40:34-35

Even Moses cannot survive the full glory of God. The tabernacle is God's way of emphasising to the Israelites that he wants to live among them, while reminding Israel that he is holy and powerful.

And this tabernacle continued as the centre of Israel's worship for centuries, being disassembled, carried by the priests and then reassembled at various sites until the beginning of the monarchy.

As we saw in our studies on the theme of covenant, God, through the prophet Nathan, tells David that he is not going to be the one to build a temple for him, but he is told that...

...I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people shall not oppress them any more, as they did at the

beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

2 Samuel 7:10-11

God had taken Israel from being a nomadic group of ex-slaves to an established nation with their own land. God is here reminding David of his covenant with Israel, conditional on their obedience to God's commands, to give them peace and security from their enemies.

Although David was prevented from building the temple, 1 Chronicles 11-29 outlines how he made sure that Solomon his son had everything in place when he succeeded David as king, including providing staggering amounts of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone, along with workers to perform the various tasks required. (1 Chronicle 22:14-16)

But the temple is not to be Solomon's status symbol.

Then David ordered all the leaders of Israel to help his son Solomon. He said to them, 'Is not the LORD your God with you? And has he not granted you rest on every side? For he has given the inhabitants of the land into my hands, and the land is subject to the LORD and to his people. Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the LORD your God. Begin to build the sanctuary of the LORD God, so that you may bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD and the sacred articles belonging to God into the temple that will be built for the Name of the LORD.'

2 Chronicles 22:17-19

The temple is to be a permanent tabernacle, a place where God and his people meet.

As God gave Moses the plans for the tabernacle, God also inspired David in his design of the temple.

Then David gave his son Solomon the plans for the portico of the temple, its buildings, its storerooms, its upper parts, its inner rooms and the place of atonement. He gave him the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the LORD and

all the surrounding rooms, for the treasuries of the temple of God and for the treasuries for the dedicated things.

1 Chronicles 28:11-12

And David understands who the temple is for...

Then King David said to the whole assembly: 'My son Solomon, the one whom God has chosen, is young and inexperienced. The task is great, because this palatial structure is not for man but for the LORD God.'

1 Chronicles 29:1

Even the craftspeople working on the temple's construction are told that they have to consecrate themselves to God. (1 Chronicles 29:5)

One of the last recorded events in David's life is a huge celebration held at the site of where the temple will be built.

And it closes with words that sum up its intended purpose...

They ate and drank with great joy in the presence of the LORD that day.

1 Chronicles 29:22

And if you hear echoes of Jesus' promise of what it will be like when we meet him in our perfect, resurrected bodies, you're hearing right!

After the death of David, Solomon embarked on a 7 year project overseeing the building of the temple.

By the standards of its time it was a magnificent structure, with the main building overlaid with gold.

At its dedication, the ark of the covenant is carried into the inner sanctuary, after which...

When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.

Then Solomon said, ‘The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell for ever.’

1 Kings 8:10-13

Just as Mount Sinai was covered in the cloud of God’s presence, and a cloud settled on the tabernacle, so the glory of the LORD fills the newly constructed temple in the form of a cloud, confirming that this will be the new centre of worship for the nation of Israel.

Solomon’s prayer of dedication is a mixture of worship, praise and request. It is a long prayer, but it’s so good I’m going to read the majority of it, making brief comments on each section of the text...

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands towards heaven and said:

‘LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below – you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it – as it is today.

‘Now LORD, the God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, “You shall never fail to have a successor to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your descendants are careful in all they do to walk before me faithfully as you have done.” And now, God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father come true.

1 Kings 8:22-26

God is the supreme God. God is a loving, covenant-keeping God. But Solomon realises that God’s promise to defend Israel requires that Israel keeps their side of this covenant as well.

‘But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!

Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open towards this temple night and day, this place of which you said, "My Name shall be there," so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays towards this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

1 Kings 8:27-30

Solomon knows that this temple is not where God literally lives. Even heaven can't contain God! This temple is a place where God's people gather to worship him, and to ask him for help and forgiveness.

'When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you, and when they turn back to you and give praise to your name, praying and making supplication to you in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to their ancestors.

'When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray towards this place and give praise to your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance.'

1 Kings 8:33-36

Part of God's covenant with Israel was that for as long as Israel was faithful to him, he would keep them safe from their enemies, and allow their crops to flourish. As we know, Israel regularly broke that covenant, but God's faithfulness and long-suffering was again and again demonstrated in the way he responded positively to national repentance.

‘When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when an enemy besieges them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, and when a prayer or plea is made by anyone among your people Israel – being aware of the afflictions of their own hearts, and spreading out their hands towards this temple – then hear from heaven, your dwelling-place. Forgive and act; deal with everyone according to all they do, since you know their hearts (for you alone know every human heart), so that they will fear you all the time they live in the land you gave our ancestors.’

1 Kings 8:37-40

And this section shows that God doesn’t just deal with Israel as a nation, but as individual people. He knows each of us better than we know ourselves, and wants us to live in a personal, loving, obedient relationship with him.

‘As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name – for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm – when they come and pray towards this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling-place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.’

1 Kings 8:41-43

This part of the prayer shows that Solomon understands God’s primary purpose for Israel, that they would be a living example of God’s greatness, goodness and love to the surrounding nations.

Here he asks God to engage with foreign visitors to the temple, making himself known to them, so that they will in turn tell others about the one and only true God.

When Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the LORD, he rose from before the altar of the LORD, where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out towards heaven. He stood and blessed the whole assembly of Israel in a loud voice, saying:

‘Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us nor forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in obedience to him and keep the commands, decrees and laws he gave our ancestors.’

1 Kings 8:54-58

God is an utterly faithful, promise keeping God. Hallelujah!

‘And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel according to each day’s need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. And may your hearts be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time.’

1 Kings 8:59-61

Solomon finishes his prayer by once again asking God to look after him and the people of Israel. Why?

...so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other.

1 Kings 8:60

Israel are meant to be a missionary nation with hearts and minds that are fully committed to God, living lives that are in step with God’s laws and commands, so that the surrounding nations will see the difference between their gods and the true God.

Solomon gets off to a great start. The Israel that he rules over enjoys a time of peace and prosperity that it had never known before, and would never know again.

And people from other nations did visit Israel, including Pharaoh's daughter who was impressed by the temple's grandeur and Solomon's wisdom, acknowledging that they are gifts from Solomon's God.

But Solomon did not listen to his own prayers, or the commands of God. These words of Deuteronomy, written centuries before Solomon was born, state...

The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

Deuteronomy 17:16-17

It's as if Solomon mistook the prohibitions for a 'to do' list!

And successive Israelite kings, with a few notable exceptions, continue to drift away from a faithful walk with God. And the people of Israel, with a few notable exceptions, do likewise.

And 400 years after Solomon's death, the priest and prophet Ezekiel was given a terrifying and heartbreaking vision of the glory of the LORD leaving the Jerusalem temple. (Ezekiel 10:18f)

But he also prophesied a day when God's glory would return to the temple (Ezekiel 43).

This return is not recorded anywhere in Old Testament.

But in the New Testament, John's gospel describes Jesus using 'dwelling' and 'glory' language.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

The word 'dwelling' is the same word used for 'tabernacle'

Jesus becoming human is God setting up his tent in the midst of our camp and living among us, full of grace and truth. He took on human form so that we could see God's glory without being destroyed by it.

And he allowed *himself* to be destroyed, so that we might be saved.

In John 2, Jesus is challenged to give a sign to prove his authority.

Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.'

They replied, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?' But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

John 2:19-22

Jesus's human body is the place of God's dwelling, the place that the tabernacle & temple foreshadowed.

Jesus is the ultimate way to experience God's presence. He is the person in who by God the Spirit, God the Father's love and grace are made real and accessible to anyone who believes in and follows him.

In fact, when we follow Jesus, we become part of God's temple.

David's passion to build a temple was part of his (very imperfect) passion to honour and give glory to God. Jesus, the perfect David, replaced the temple as the place of God's presence.

And in 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of the Christian community as being God's temple, the place where God's Spirit lives. (1 Corinthians 3:16)

And, in the New Jerusalem described in Revelation, there will be no temple, because our redeemed, resurrected bodies will be able to experience a face-to-face relationship with God. (Revelation 21:22)

God's intention to dwell with his people is woven through the whole Bible, and that desire remains the same today, he longs to transform our lives, both individual and communal. He wants us to experience his love, peace and joy in every area of our existence.

As the writer to the Hebrews tells us...

...since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

What amazing truths. Thanks to Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, God's throne is a 'throne of grace', a place we can 'approach with confidence that we will find grace to help us in our time of need'.

Let's keep asking Jesus what part he wants us to play in being a part of his temple, in the power of his daily love, forgiveness, grace and power.

Amen.