

## Reaching the Summit

1 Kings 8

Several years ago, I was invited to join one of our fellow believers in a meeting with two Jehovah's Witnesses. These Jehovah's Witnesses were a husband and wife, and we had a very cordial and insightful conversation with them about our theological differences. If you're not aware, Jehovah's Witnesses hold to an ancient heresy called Arianism, the teaching that Jesus Christ is a created being. He is a highly exalted being, but he is not equal to Jehovah (the name they use for God). As we talked about Scripture and theology, there was a point in the conversation when the husband said something that made me realize, "There's the heart of the difference between us." He was expressing his disbelief in the idea of the Incarnation, the union of God and man in one Person, Jesus Christ. He said, "I can't imagine Jehovah coming down here to clean up our mess. If you own a grocery store, and you have a spill on aisle 5, you don't go clean that up. You send your janitor to do it." Immediately I thought of the story in John 13 of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, and I thought, "No, this is exactly who God is! He is the God who comes all the way down to clean up our mess, and that's the astounding news of the gospel!"

This vision of a God who comes all the way down to us is not something that drops out of the blue when Jesus comes on the scene. There is a whole story leading up to it in the story of Old Testament Israel. Here in 1 Kings 8, we have reached the summit of that story. It's fitting that 1 Kings 8 takes place on a mountain. It echoes the assembly of Israel at Mount Sinai, where God, who had just delivered them from slavery in Egypt, revealed himself to them and made a covenant with them. Now, almost 500 years later, we are at Mount Moriah, the temple mount, where King Solomon dedicates the temple he has built to the Lord. I have said before that Solomon's reign is the high point of Israel's story. Within the story of Solomon's reign, 1 Kings 8 is the peak, the summit of the summit. From this point on we will see things start to go downhill. But for today, let's enjoy the breathtaking view at the top of this mountain, because it has so much to show us about who our God is.

When Moses interceded for God to restore his presence among his people Israel after the golden calf incident, he prayed, "Please show me your glory" (Exod. 33:18). The Lord's response was, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Exod. 33:19). I take that to mean that the very revelation of God's name, his heart, his character, is sovereign grace. He is gracious to whom he is gracious, and he shows mercy to whom he shows mercy. Why? Because grace, by definition, is something that is not owed. No one is entitled to it. If he chooses to show grace to some and not others, that is his prerogative. It is by his sovereign freedom alone that he gives it. And until you grasp that truth firmly, you will feel entitled to what is a sheer gift. You will lack the sense of awe, wonder, and utter gratitude that is fitting for those who have received from God what he absolutely did not have to give us, namely, himself.

What Moses saw in the proclamation of God's goodness is here further revealed in the festive occasion of the dedication of the temple. First I want to lay out for you how this long chapter unfolds, which seems to be in the form of a chiasm:

- A     **Opening festivities: bringing up the ark (vv. 1-13)**
- B     **Solomon’s words of blessing (vv. 14-21)**
- C     **Solomon’s prayer of dedication (vv. 22-53)**
- B’    **Solomon’s words of blessing (vv. 54-61)**
- A’    **Closing festivities: sacrifices and feasting (vv. 62-66)**

You can see that the chapter opens and closes with festivities, as the ark is brought into the temple at the beginning of the chapter, and the whole assembly celebrates a two-week feast at the end. When Solomon speaks, he speaks words of blessing to the people as two bookends on his prayer of dedication, which is the center of the chapter. The temple itself is not the point of the chapter, but what it tells us about God is. I want to draw out of this chapter several observations about how the temple shows us the heart of God as a heart of sovereign grace. This grace is demonstrated in paradoxes. A paradox is a statement that is seemingly contradictory, but upon reflection you can see how it is actually coherent. Let’s take a closer look at 1 Kings 8 to see the paradoxes that reveal to us the sovereign grace of God.

First, the filling of the temple and feasting at the temple show us the paradox that

**1. God is above us, but he dwells among us.**

When Paul came to Athens in Acts 17, he was distressed at all the temples he saw to false gods. He understood that in the pagan worldview, humans have something to offer to the gods. We can build them nice temples to serve as homes for them. We can bring them offerings that meet their needs. And if we meet their needs, they will be inclined to meet ours as well. So pagan worship becomes very transactional by nature. Into this setting Paul boldly proclaimed to the Athenians that the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24-25). Pagan gods are basically bigger versions of human beings. The God who made the world is the self-contained, self-sufficient, transcendent Creator. He doesn’t need our temples or our offerings.

King Solomon clearly recognizes that truth, as evidenced in a statement he makes in his prayer in verse 27: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house I have built!” Solomon understands that the Lord does not need this temple, and that he cannot be bound to it. But if this temple is going to serve as a place for his presence to dwell among the people of Israel, it will be by his free decision alone, not by any compulsion, obligation, or need within himself.

The chapter begins with an account that has echoes of 2 Samuel 6, when King David had the ark of the covenant brought to Jerusalem. At that time, David placed the ark in a tent on Mount Zion, the City of David, which by Solomon’s time was one section of the city of Jerusalem. Solomon had the priests, with great pomp and circumstance, bring the ark from there up the temple mount to be brought into its proper location inside the inner sanctuary of the temple, under the wings of the large golden cherubim, the symbolic guardians of that holy place, the intersection of heaven and earth. The ark, which represents God’s very presence, after centuries of moving from place to place, is finally home. As verse 4 notes, Solomon also had the tabernacle that Moses had built, with its holy articles, brought to the temple to be stored. The tabernacle had been located at

Gibeon for some time, separated from the ark, and now that a permanent dwelling place for God has been built, the mobile tent in which he formerly dwelled is ready to be retired.

The key verses to note in the first section of the text are verses 10-11, which tell us that the cloud representing the glory presence of God filled the temple once the priests brought the ark into it. This is also what had previously happened at the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34-38, when God showed his pleasure in the holy place by manifesting his presence there. Solomon built a temple for the Lord, and, and the Lord “moved in,” not out of any need in himself, but because he chose to sanctify that place with his presence.

I want to skip ahead to the end of the story, where we note in verses 62-66 that the people of Israel offered to the Lord, over a span of two weeks, peace offerings consisting of 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. This was a lavish feast. The number of animals slaughtered and prepared were so many that the bronze altar for sacrifices simply wasn’t big enough for the purpose, so Solomon consecrated the whole courtyard outside the temple as a massive altar. Verse 63 tells us these were “peace offerings,” which means the fat portions were burned as an offering to the Lord, and the rest of the animal was shared by the priests and the people in a fellowship meal, as they ate together in God’s presence. The peace offering was God’s way of saying to Israel, “You are welcome at my table.” The God who needs nothing from us, whom the highest heavens cannot contain, nevertheless welcomes us into his presence. That is sovereign grace.

I hope you can see that Solomon’s temple was one step on the way toward the Incarnation, the moment when God himself, in his grace, made his dwelling among us as a man, Jesus of Nazareth. And when Jesus completed his work of atonement, he ascended to the right hand of God, from which he sent upon his church the glory presence of God once again, only this time not in the form of a cloud but rather as tongues of fire (Acts 2). When Jesus Christ poured out the Holy Spirit upon his church, the dwelling place of God on earth was permanently relocated. He no longer dwells in a temple in Jerusalem. He indwells his people. And when we assemble as the church of Jesus Christ, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3:16 that we are the God’s temple. Gathering for worship with your brothers and sisters around the ordinary means of God’s grace, his Word and his table, is for us every Sunday a foretaste of Heaven. When I say that, I don’t mean that’s how you or I always perceive it. I mean that is what it is, objectively, whether we perceive it or not, and so we must train ourselves to see rightly. As you find yourself at the summit of Israel’s story in 1 Kings 8, I hope you are never able to get over the fact that God himself, who transcends us and needs nothing from us, in sovereign grace has made his home among us through the events of the Incarnation and Pentecost. That is who he is, as evidenced by his moving into the temple and feasting there with his people.

As we move through the story to Solomon’s two words of blessing in verses 14-21 and 54-61, we note a second paradox revealed to us by the temple, which is this:

**2. God owes us nothing, but he makes and keeps lavish promises to us.**

Solomon’s blessings are the two bookends on his prayer of dedication, and these blessings give praise to God for the promises he has made and kept. The first blessing (vv. 14-21) focuses primarily on promises to David. The second blessing (vv. 54-61) broadens the focus to God’s promises to Israel. Let’s take a look at each one.

In verse 15, Solomon says, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to David my father.” What is it that God promised to David with his mouth that he has now fulfilled with his hand? He promised David that his son would inherit his throne and would build a house for the Lord’s name. Now that task has been completed. Solomon understands that it was by the Lord’s provision, power, and wisdom that he was able to secure his reign over Israel and complete the building project that led up to this glorious day. The very existence of the temple itself bears witness to the faithfulness of God to his promise to David.

But let’s recall something about the story of David. He was not the first king of Israel. King Saul was. When Saul was given the task of annihilating the Amalekites, and he failed to carry out that task, the Lord rejected him from being king over Israel. The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, an evil spirit came and tormented him, and the book of 1 Samuel ends with King Saul and his sons killed in battle on Mount Gilboa, which marks the end of Saul’s line. Saul had a great failure and experienced a great consequence, as the Lord cut him off. Then David became king, and while he certainly surpassed Saul in numerous ways, King David also had a great failure. He took the wife of one of his loyal soldiers in an act of adultery, impregnated her, and then murdered her husband to cover up his sin. So did the Lord cut off David and his house the same way he cut off Saul? No, he didn’t. David suffered terribly for his sin, but his throne endured, and after him his dynasty endured. The Lord built him a house as promised, so that David’s son Solomon could build the Lord a house. Why would God reject Saul for his failure, but not reject David? It’s because God made a promise to David in 2 Samuel 7. It was a promise of sovereign grace. David did nothing to merit it, and by the sheer gift of God’s grace, God had promised to David in 2 Samuel 7:14 that David’s son would be God’s son. What does a father do when his son sins? He disciplines him, but he doesn’t disown him. God disowned the house of Saul, but he will never disown the house of David, and that is solely because of his promise. He owed David nothing, but he made lavish promises to David, and he kept those promises.

In his second word of blessing (vv. 54-61), after his prayer of dedication, Solomon hits on the same note of God’s faithfulness to his promises, only this time he reaches back before David to promises God made to Israel. In verse 56 he says, “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 spoke by Moses his servant.” When I read that I think of Deuteronomy 12:10-11, where Moses had said to Israel, “But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety, then to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices...” After the exodus, Israel experienced a period of wandering as they moved through the desert to the Promised Land. But even after they took over the land under Joshua’s leadership, they still had not yet experienced “rest,” in the sense of security from enemies. The time of the judges and the reigns of Saul and David were both marked by cycles of war, and throughout this time the ark of God had no permanent place to rest. Now, under Solomon, the wandering period is finally over, and the time of rest has come. The Lord enters his rest at the temple, and he invites Israel to join him in it. You may have noticed that Solomon had the ark brought up to the temple in the seventh month of the year (v. 2), which means he waited about 11 months after the temple’s completion to hold this festival (see 1 Kings 6:38).<sup>1</sup> Why would he

wait that long? It's because the seventh month was the time to celebrate the Feast of Booths, a week-long celebration of God's provision for Israel in the wilderness, when they dwelt in "booths" or tents that moved from place to place. It was a fitting occasion to mark Israel's transition from the time of wandering to the time of rest.

God owed David nothing, but he promised that his son would sit on his throne and build a house for the Lord. God owed Israel nothing, but he promised them rest with him the Promised Land. Promises made in the freedom of God's grace are now promises kept by his steadfast love. By the same token, God has made even more lavish promises to us. He has not promised that we can visit his house in Jerusalem, where we must be held at a distance from the inner sanctuary, but instead that we are the very stones in his new temple, and that one day his very dwelling place will be with us, where we will see his face, and he will wipe away every tear from our eyes. He has promised to all who are weary and heavy laden that if we come to him, he will give us rest. We must understand that God owes us none of this. We are not in any way entitled to his presence or the blessing of his rest. But when God makes promises, he keeps them. The only way God can be obligated to us is if he obligates himself.

Contrast this view of God with the transactional gods of the pagan world. For pagans, it's a matter of "I scratched your back, now you scratch mine. You owe me." But the truth is, we can't scratch God's back. We can't enrich in any way the One from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things (Romans 11:36). God can never be in our debt, and thus we are not entitled to his promises. And yet, in sovereign grace, he makes lavish promises. But contrast this view of God also with the terrifying view of Allah in Islamic theology. According to Islamic teaching, Allah is raw power, incapable of being bound in any way, even by his own word. So Allah may promise you that following the teachings of his prophet Mohammed will get you to Heaven, and then on the Day of Judgment he may declare that all who follow the prophet are condemned to Hell. Muslims do not think of Allah as covenantally bound to his people in steadfast love. But contrary to the transactional nature of paganism, and contrary to the capricious nature of Allah, the God of the Bible is a God who owes us nothing, and yet promises everything, and he is always faithful to his promises. The very existence of the temple itself bears witness to that.

Now we come to a third and final paradox that the temple reveals about God, and that has to do with what the temple is for. From the temple's purpose we learn that

### **3. God abhors our sin, but he is eager to forgive us through his appointed Mediator.**

God is holy, which means that in all things, he always remains true to himself. You may recall the story of when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant, and they put it inside the temple of their god Dagon. What was inside that temple? A statue of Dagon. That was what you would normally find in a pagan temple: an image of the god. But with the Lord's temple, there is no statue. The God who transcends all creation cannot be reduced to a creaturely image made by man. So what do you find in the inner sanctuary of the Lord's temple? You find his ark of the covenant. And what is inside that ark? According to verse 9, it was the two tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments, the tablets representing the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. By putting his Law in the innermost sanctuary of his dwelling place, God shows that his holiness will not be compromised, that his standards will not be relaxed, and thus that his perfect commitment to the good entails his hatred of all that transgresses his law.

A holy God dwells among an unholy people. And that's why Solomon dedicates the temple with a prayer calling upon God to have regard for it as a place of mediation, so that his people might call out to him and find forgiveness of their sins. Forgiveness is the leading idea of this prayer, as verse 30 makes plain: "And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive." Solomon goes on to list seven scenarios where he envisions God's people calling upon him toward the temple in a time of need, and five of the seven mention their sins as the occasion.

I won't take the time to read all these scenarios, but in most of them Solomon envisions the people of Israel experiencing some calamity because of their sin, whether that be defeat in battle, drought, plague, etc., and out of that experience of suffering they seek the Lord at his temple and find his forgiveness for their sin. The seventh scenario in verses 46-53 caps off the list, so let's read verses 46-50: "If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, for off or near, yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying 'We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly,' if they repent with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them." Solomon envisions the people of Israel one day in the captivity of exile turning their faces toward Jerusalem to pray in the direction of the holy place, recognize that God's name rests there and that his favor is mediated to them from there, even in exile.

In this prayer, Solomon lists off a number of covenant curses that Israel might experience for their sins. You can see the curses God threatened against Israel in Deuteronomy 28, and they include, among other things, defeat in battle, drought, famine, plague, and ultimately captivity in a foreign land. We will see every one of those curses come to pass in the story of 1-2 Kings that follows this event. The original readers of 1-2 Kings were likely Israelites in exile who were at that very time experiencing the curses of the covenant. God is holy, and he will not allow his name to be endlessly blasphemed by his people. So when they persist in sin, in the worship of other gods and all the downstream effects of that false worship in their society, God answers them in his holiness with wrath. He inflicts judgments upon them in greater and greater measure, culminating in the very destruction of their nation. Yet even then, Solomon prays, let the temple be a place of mediation. Let the people who have justly merited God's wrath seek forgiveness and find it at his temple. When Daniel, a faithful Jew in exile, knelt down before his window three times a day and prayed facing in the direction of Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10), he was praying in accord with Solomon's request here, recognizing that a holy God has made his forgiveness and favor available to us through his appointed place of mediation.

When we pray in Jesus' name, we are not simply repeating a formula. We are calling upon the Lord to hear us, not because we deserve anything from him, but solely because we approach him on the basis of the merits of the Mediator he has given us. The temple was the place where

Israel's sins could be dealt with, but it was always a type pointing to something greater. Now we do not seek the Lord at a temple, but through his Son Jesus Christ, the one Mediator between God and men. When it comes to our sin, there are two terrible mistakes we must avoid. One is downplaying its seriousness. Maybe we compare ourselves to others instead of the holy standards of God's law to make us feel like our sin isn't that bad, or maybe we just ignore our own sin and try to put it out of mind. If we downplay our sin, we are downplaying the very holiness of God. We are telling God, "You don't carry much weight with me." Let us be honest about how abhorrent our sin is. But the terrible mistake on the other side is to refuse to receive the Lord's forgiveness for our sin. If you have brought your sin to the Lord and sought forgiveness in Christ, but you still insist on carrying around the guilt for it, you are trying to be more holy than God. You are downplaying the cross and the effectiveness of the mediation that Jesus Christ gives you. At my home church in East Texas, we used to sing a hymn that began with these words:

"Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that *exceeds our sin and our guilt!*  
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured—there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.  
Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is *greater than all our sin.*"

The temple as the place of mediation, and as a whisper of a greater Temple to come, the Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, is a testimony that God is holy, that our sin is abhorrent, and that God's grace is greater than all our sin.

Paradoxes of sovereign grace. God is above us, yet he dwells with us. God owes us nothing, but he has promised us everything. God abhors our sin, but he eagerly hears and forgives as we come to him through Jesus Christ. The temple reveals these truths about the heart of God. So what then should our response be? Let's take another lesson from King Solomon. In verse 22 we read, "Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven." That's the beginning of the prayer. Let's look at the end of the prayer in verse 54: "Now as Solomon finished offering all this prayer and plea to the LORD, he arose from before the altar of the LORD, where he had knelt with his hands outstretched toward heaven." At the beginning of the prayer, Solomon stood with outstretched hands. By the end of the prayer, he was kneeling. What does that tell us? It tells us that King Solomon, the most powerful, dignified man in Israel, was so overcome with wonder and gratitude to the Lord during the course of his prayer that he fell to his knees while holding his hands outstretched toward heaven in a posture of praise. That is what I desire for us as we once again come to the Lord's table, that we would simply be overwhelmed. Overwhelmed with awe at the holy, transcendent God who needs nothing from us and owes nothing to us. But also overwhelmed at that same God who is, in sovereign grace, God with us, and God for us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible that Solomon even waited 13 years after the temple's construction to bring the ark into it while his palace was being built, but that interpretation seems less likely.