

What can we learn about God?

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[0:00] We're going to look into the Bible in 1 Kings chapter 8. We have been looking chapter by chapter into this book.

! What sort of person is God?

So Steve at the communion was commenting on the pride celebrations of yesterday. And they were glorifying something.

They were celebrating something. I don't think they were celebrating God. God ought to be celebrated.

He should be glorified. What sort of God is he? What sort of person is the God of the Bible?

[1:15] I say the God of the Bible because there are many made-up gods. Many made-up gods. I'm not talking about them. You could find loads of people say, I like to think of God as this or I like to think of God as that.

Not really interested in that this morning. Thinking of what God says about himself. Is he like a father? Now, I don't know what sort of father you had.

But you probably called your father dad. There are many dads. There are many types of father. Some types of father, for example, always give in to pressure.

Is God like that? Is that the sort of father he is? That if you pressurize him enough, he's going to wilt. Some sorts of dad never keep their word.

They promise things, but they don't keep their word. Is that the sort of father that God is? Is that his glory? Or is he, are we to think of God as an authority figure?

[2:26] As we might think of politicians, perhaps. The police. The judicial system. Judges. And you may or may not have a high opinion of those people.

You might have the opinion that you can never trust politicians. I don't think that's quite true. But I can see why you might think that. And you might have in your mind a sense that any authority figure is not to be trusted.

Any authority figure just makes up the rules as they go along. So when they say one thing one day, they're going to say something else the next day. So there's no security in such people.

That's what you might be thinking. You might be thinking, perhaps from bad experiences you've had, that an authority figure is someone who is unreasonable, unsympathetic, and unlovable.

Is that what God is like? So those are the thoughts that we'll have. Won't answer all those questions this morning. But we will look at the two things in this chapter, or this bit of the chapter, that show us about God and his glory.

[3:36] And the two things are a box and a cloud. And they are symbols of God's glory. So let's look at the text. So we're in 1 Kings chapter 8.

And what happens in the text says, King Solomon summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of all Israel. Sorry. The elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, all the men of Israel came together to King Solomon at a festival in the month of Ephraim, the seventh month.

This would have been actually the Feast of Tabernacles. And there's quite a bit there about assembling. So everybody got together. So there's the people assembling.

And the point of this assembly is in verse 3. When all the elders of Israel had arrived, the priests took up the ark. They brought up the ark of the Lord and the tent of meeting and all the sacred furnishings in it.

The priests and the Levites carried them up. And King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle they could not be recorded or counted.

[4:52] The priests then brought the ark of the Lord's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the most holy place. So there's the temple up on the mountain.

That's where we're heading. There's the ark. And I'll give you some more details of that at the moment. But it's a box, a gold-covered box. And it's carried up. And as it's carried up, there are many sacrifices made, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle they could not be recorded or counted. So I just want to stop at this point, give you some more details in a minute, but to say, well, what they're doing here is actually quite dangerous. Because this ark thing, this thing, has a history of previously being moved.

And I'll read you what happens. It was in the time of this king's father, in the time of King David, when they were moving the ark, not into the temple, because that hadn't been built, but up into the city.

And it said, they came to the threshing floor of Nason, and a chap called Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because it was being transported on a cart, and the oxen stumbled.

[6:14] So it wobbled, and he reached out and touched it. And poor chap, the poor chap got zapped. It says, the Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act.

Therefore, God struck him down, and he died there before the ark of God. So if you don't handle this ark properly, you can get killed, because that's what happened to Uzzah.

So they're thinking about this, and the antidote to this is a respectful behavior towards the ark. It shouldn't be on a cart anyway. It should be carried, which is what it's being done.

And they are sacrificing sheep in countless numbers. Is that what it says? Sacrificing so many sheep and cattle, they could not be recorded or counted.

So the whole thing is covered with blood. There is this sacrificial, almost non-stop sacrifice being made as this movement proceeds.

[7:22] They place it in the temple. They're heading for the inner compartment at the back of the temple there. And they place it there, and then it says in verse 10, then when the priests withdrew from the holy place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord.

And it says the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of God filled the temple, sorry, the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

And Solomon comments on this, Solomon says, the Lord has said he would dwell in a dark cloud. It's actually just one word, not two words, dark and cloud, just a sort of a darkness, a thickness, a darkness. And Solomon says, I have indeed built a magnificent temple, more literally, an exalted house, a lifted up house for you, a place for you to dwell forever.

So that's the, just go back, that's what happens in the text, that's the story. Okay? That's the story. So what questions come from this?

[8:49] What are the main points of the text? So the question you might ask reading this is, well, what is this ark? What is it? What's the ark anyway? Why?

What's so special about taking it to the temple? Because it's obviously a special event. What is the smoke and this cloud, darkness?

What's that all about? Why does it do what it does? And then you might also ask, why isn't this the most important part of the chapter?

Because it isn't the most important part of the chapter. The privilege of heard prayer is the most important thing in the chapter.

That's what we saw last week. So what about this bit? So let's look at it together. So let's do what the ark is anyway. Okay, it was originally built for, in the time of Moses, time of the Exodus, for the tent that they had.

[9:53] It gets called a tabernacle in English for some reason. That's what it is. And the size of it was, I would imagine, not too different from the size of the stage piano we have there.

So I did this on SketchUp. Have any of you used SketchUp, a piece of software SketchUp, and they plonk a user in the middle of it. I couldn't get rid of the user, so we've got a random American guy standing next to the ark.

But that will give you something of the scale of it. So, you know, it's not vast, is it? It is about the size of that piano. So 750 millimeters by 750 millimeters by 1.25 meters.

So that's the size of it. It's quite small, certainly carryable. The word for ark, it just means box. It's the same word as used for the coffin that Joseph was taken home in from Egypt.

Not in Hebrew, the same word as Noah's ark. So two different things in Hebrew. It's referred to in the Old Testament 195 times, and twice in the New Testament.

[11:04] And of those references in the Old Testament, 16 times it's called the ark of testimony, and 42 times it's called the ark of the covenant. The rest of the time it's just called the ark of God, or just the ark.

It was covered with gold. It had rings. At some point along the side, not quite sure how high up, but these poles were inserted into the rings, and they're the carrying poles.

And in case you're wondering, it is the same ark that is referenced in Raiders of the Lost Ark, which I think was on the telly yesterday. Was it on the telly yesterday? We don't know, do we? I think it was.

But don't get your theology from Raiders of the Lost Ark, because that's a piece of fiction. But it's fiction about this ark. Yeah.

So what's the ark? Let's look at some of the details of it. There it is again. It has, or it had, two cherubim on top.

[12:09] Cherubim is a plural word. So there's, I put the two of them on the top there. In, that's what it was originally.

By the time we get to this history of the ark, there doesn't seem to be any mention of the two little cherubim on top. They must have been about this size, mustn't they?

They couldn't have been huge, otherwise they would have toppled off. So I'm imagining they're sort of that sort of size, to fit them on. And last time I mentioned cherub-like creatures in the ancient world, and here is the picture of them.

So this, I think, is from the Louvre. These are, I think these are Assyrian creatures, which are of the same sort of thing, I think, as what the Hebrews would have had as cherubs.

Here's another picture. And the cherubs are guardian creatures. They guarded the way back into the Garden of Eden.

[13:12] Do you remember? Now, I thought, and it shows how bad my memory is, I thought it just said one cherub, but it didn't. It said cherubim. So the guarding of the way back into the garden was by plural cherubim.

And I can't help but think of guarding the way to the Euro tunnel thing in Calais, a fenced-off area that you're trying to keep people out of with guards patrolling.

And ever since that day, we have not been allowed back into the garden. And it's the cherubs, the cherubim, that act as those guards.

And there were two massive cherubim inside the holiest place. So that was my little picture of that from a previous time. So this is the 20, so 10-meter cubed holy place.

There's the little ark. And then these two, I was tempted to say these two bad boys, but they're, these guys, they're there guarding the, guarding the ark in the holy place or accompanying the ark in the holy place.

[14:28] And the cherubim are God's minders, they're God's security staff, they're God's transportation department. And there's another picture of one that I used for these guys because you've got the wings spread out there.

And they speak about God's personal majesty and grandeur. So when we go to meet God, we see these, we're mindful of these stately creatures accompanying God.

I think they're pretty, if they were anything like this, I think they're somewhat intimidating, aren't they? You'd think that the God whom they are accompanying must be a great God.

And this is one of the things about God, He is great. He is greatly to be praised, He is greatly to be respected, greatly to be revered, greatly to be feared, the Bible says.

This is one of the lessons we learn from this whole setup here in the ark, His majesty and His grandeur. Let's go a little bit further with the box. Inside were the tablets of stone with the ten words, the ten commandments.

[15:58] And we're told in verse 9 that at this stage in the ark's history, there was nothing else in there, there was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb when the Lord cut a covenant with the Israelites when they came out of Egypt.

So you've got a stone reminder of that agreement. Testimony, it's sometimes referred to as the testimony.

And I wonder whether this is actually a rather hostile thing. It's saying that these ten words stand as a sort of testimony against the people, against their sin, against their fickleness, against their, yeah, their failure.

I think that's a little bit sobering that at the heart of this meeting with God, there's this testimony of how much people like us have failed. So it is very difficult to go waltzing into God's presence without the humility of remembering how much we've failed.

But it is also called the ark of the covenant. And if you like, the covenant pulls in the opposite direction. It says we're bonded together. God has made a covenant to bring his people near, to cover their sin.

[17:28] And we are people not of the old covenant but of the new covenant. A new covenant sealed with better, a better sacrifice under better terms and conditions.

But the covenant is there. On the top of the ark was the lid or the cover. And it was called, let's just see if I've got this right, I think it's called the kaparoth.

And it's to do with the Hebrew word to cover. So it was the cover. When you make it into a verb, you get kippur, which is to cover, and it's used in a sense of atonement, to cover sin.

So Yom Kippur, Yom Kippur is? This is the Hebrew and it is the day of atonement. Yom is day. Yom Kippur is the day of atonement.

In the old Bibles, they took, I think they over-translated this and made two words out of one word and made it the mercy seat. So in the old hymns, if you hear about the mercy seat, it's actually referring to the cover, the top, the lid of this box.

[18:50] It is a place of covering sin in this sense that on the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, in Leviticus 16.15.

Let's see if I can find Leviticus. Leviticus 16.15. On this one day, the priest would slaughter a goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and as he did with the bull's blood, he shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it.

In this way, he will make atonement for the most holy place because of the uncleanness and the rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. So one day of the year, the priest would take blood, go it right into the holy place and blood would be applied to the cover and around there so the cover would be covered if you like.

The sin of the people would be covered at the cover. And it says, he will make atonement for the most holy place because of their uncleanness.

And the idea that comes to my mind is that you have this most holy place sort of quarantined behind multiple barriers. barriers. So there were barriers around the temple.

[20:25] There were two barriers around the temple and then there's a doorway to go into one bit and then another doorway to go into the next bit. So it's really almost hermetically sealed.

But on this one day, they cleanse even this place because the uncleanness of the people might somehow have wafted in and been brought in to contaminate even this place.

And even here, it needs to be disinfected, if you like, from the sin of the people. In this way, he will make atonement for the most holy place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been.

Sin must be pretty bad if it can get through all those barriers right to that holy place. Just imagine how awful it is in the outside world, as it were.

And how much more in the New Testament do we need cleansing from our sin?

[21:33] Because we're not holy people, are we? We're not. We need blood applied to us. We need the blood of Jesus Christ to cleanse us from our sins.

And just going further with the box, this is the place where God sits. It's spoken of as his throne. So, let me quote to you from 1 Samuel 4.

This was another occasion in the history of the ark when it was actually sent out to battle in a rather misguided and superstitious action.

But it says, the people sent men to Shiloh and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty who is enthroned between the cherubim.

That's how it was thought of. And in this place where the cherubim, that was God's throne. He sits enthroned between the cherubim.

[22:40] And the thing is, of course, if you look, what do you see? You don't see anything. God is not of that sort of visible form. But we're to think of this as constituting the place where God sits, the place where God is to be found, the place where God is enthroned.

2 Kings 19, 15, the person praying prays, O Lord, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim. So this is what this box is about. And it's a very, very remarkable thing. So what's so special about transporting the box up to the inner room of the temple?

Well, it was long planned by King David. He'd been thinking of doing this for quite a while. And it is the movement of the Lord God from where he was.

So I've got a click here. At one point, the ark was in Philistine territory, beginning of the book of Samuel. It ended up in exile, far away.

[23:55] And it's being brought back to Jerusalem. That's where it's heading. And it's been a long journey. So it's gone to various resting places on the way.

This place and that place. At one point it stayed in somebody's farm. Different places it's been at. But it's headed to the highest place.

There's a child running to a door there. The child has been brought back. And it's headed to the central point of the Lord's city.

At one point he didn't have the city, so we're making progress on that. It's being brought to the place near the throne of the king. And up it goes.

And in the time of King David it was brought into the city. And now it's being brought into a place that most suits his holy glory because Solomon has built a temple.

[24:59] And now the ark goes into the temple to great acclaim. So when I talked about being exalted and being lifted up, that's exactly what is happening to the ark.

And you might have noticed, would you like just to turn to that passage where it says, 1 Kings 8, did you notice at every point it says, like verse 1, they came to bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Zion, but it says to bring up the ark of the Lord.

And then it says in verse 3, the elders of the Israel arrived, the priests took up the ark, and they brought up the ark of the Lord.

And does it say it again? I don't know whether it does, but every time it's moved, it's moved up. It says in verse 4, the priests and Levites carried them up, so it's going up, and that's a great thing to acclaim.

one other thing about the ark, there's a promise in Jeremiah 13 that one day it will be forgotten, and it will not be missed.

[26:24] It's a funny thing to say, isn't it? Because this idea of God's glory, his throne, the place where he's to be found, the cherubim, and it says one day you won't be that bothered about that, and I wonder if there's a reason, and I think here's the question, did it go high enough?

Did it go high enough? Was God exalted high enough? He went from exile up the mountain to the city and then up into the temple, but is that high enough?

And I would say God deserves to go higher than that. And I would say that what the ark took us so far, but we have a completing of this journey, when Jesus was raised from the dead, exalted, ascended into heaven, exalted to the highest place, and it says God has exalted Jesus to the

highest place, and given him the name that is above every name, and the lamb is upon the throne, and he is at the center of everything, the highest place that heaven affords is his by sovereign right, and Jesus has this highest place, and I think that if we have Jesus in the highest place, we're not actually that bothered about the ark, are we?

We don't miss it, because we've got the fulfillment of this in Jesus. Let's turn secondly to the cloud. So this is verse 10 and 11.

The priests withdrew from the holy place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. The priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. [28:12] And Solomon said the Lord said he would dwell in a dark cloud. So cloud, I think cloud smoke is all the same thing, we might differentiate between them, but I think it's all the same sort of thing actually.

And this dark cloud is linked with the glory of God. And it's interesting because we usually link glory with brightness, but here it's linked with, well it's darkness, it's a dark, thick, impenetrable cloud. And the word for glory, if you trace it back, is not actually to do with shining, it's to do with weight, it's to do with substantialness.

Now if you have something with the glory of God, you have something full of significance and substance and meaning and impressiveness, weightiness, that's what the idea of glory is.

And here's this dark cloud. Now it takes us back to the days of Moses, and there's a quote here in Exodus 20, let me find it for you. it's in Exodus 20, verse 18 and following.

[29:33] This is in the time when Moses spoke with God, the people had come out of Egypt, their destination was Mount Sinai, to meet with God on that mountain, the mountain's also called Horeb.

it says, the ten words were given, when the people saw the thunder and the 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 have 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.

And the people remained at a distance, but Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. And the God of Mount Sinai lives in thick darkness.

Psalms 97 says this about God, let me read you the full quote, of it, Psalm 97 2, the Lord reigns, let the earth be glad, let the distant shores rejoice.

[30:53] Clouds and thick darkness surround him, righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.

His lightning lights up the world, the earth sees and trembles, the mountains melt like wax before the Lord, he is the Lord of all the earth. The heavens became his righteousness and all the people see his glory.

So this cloud is linked with the weightiness of God, the massiveness of God, the depth of God, the greatness of God.

It's a good reminder for us, isn't it? Because one of the, we tend to drift away from God and we tend to, our idea of God a bit like a balloon that tends to lose air as you just leave it and it sort of shrivels up.

And we tend towards a smaller and smaller shriveled up view of God and we need the Bible to remind us that God is great and he's mighty, he's powerful and he's someone to, where it would be right to tremble in his presence because that's who he is.

[32:11] It's like Mount Sinai and it's like the tabernacle. When the tabernacle, the tent where God met his people, where that came on stream in Exodus 40 verse 44, verse, I think this is verse 34 actually, it says, Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and the altar and put up the curtain at the entrance and so Moses finished the work.

Then it says, 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 upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

And it goes on to say how this glory guided the people and stayed and moved and they just followed. But you have the same thing here then in the tabernacle, the glory of God filling that

place.

And later in the temple, later on, Isaiah in his vision, many kings later, in the year that King Isaiah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. and above him were the seraph, seraphim each with six wings, saying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord almighty, heaven and earth are filled with his glory.

[33:43] And at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke, Isaiah 6. And his reaction, woe to me, I am ruined, I am a man of unclean lips, I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord almighty.

It's another reminder, isn't it, of this glory which is God's massive holiness, and as we get a sense of that, it makes us quite serious about who God is, and who we are before him.

It sort of humbles us, doesn't it? It doesn't give us brightened pride, it gives us spiritual humility. So why does this cloud do what it does?

That's a very good question, I've been puzzling over this last couple of weeks actually. Why does it do what it does? It fills the temple, and the priests couldn't do their service because of this cloud. Well one thing it does show, it does demonstrate that God will actually come and live in this temple. So when the Bible talks about God's determination to dwell with his people, this cloud says I do, I will, I am going to do that.

[35:07] That God really will dwell with sinful humankind despite the danger to us and the immense condescension that God has to step down a long way to slob slob with people like us.

But God is prepared to do that and the cloud says that. So that's a great encouragement. God was prepared to live with those people, he's prepared to live with us. But the cloud is a funny thing, I don't say funny isn't really the right word, it's a curious thing, it's a paradoxical thing.

The cloud shows God's presence, presence, but it also hides God's presence. Because the one thing about this thick cloud, you know, this thick smoke, this thick mist, this thick fog, this thick cloud, you can't see a hand in front of your face.

So Aaron, when we were doing our study on this, he says it's like a pea super. Anybody remember pea supers? When the smog was so thick, it was like pea soup?

So this cloud, you can't see your hand in front of your face and you certainly can't see the face of God. And also, this cloud, when God comes so near, normal service is not normal, it's disrupted.

[36:43] Normal service is disrupted. It doesn't work. The priests cannot do their stuff because of the thickness of this cloud. Now, I'm trying to get my head around that.

Is that what God wants? That normal service should be disrupted? Because I think his whole purpose is to produce a new normality, a new service, a way of holy people cleansed from their sins, serving God in the holy place.

God does not do that. It stops things. So I think we have a better revelation of God's glory in Jesus. He was transfigured, you remember, and the cloud was there, but Jesus was there and could still be seen.

It says he will come with the clouds of heaven. One day he will return with clouds. God will and we will have a privilege that those people never had because when they got close to the glory of God all they could see was thick darkness.

But we through the gospel see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and we're promised we shall see his face.

[38:07] And I think we have a privilege which is far above what those people in one kings had. We shall see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

So we've looked at these, the box, we've looked at the cloud. I think they just simply remind us of who God is and the greatness of his exaltation and the greatness of his glory.

And why is this passage not the center of the chapter? Why isn't this the center of the Bible? Why don't we stop here and say that's it? Well why? I don't know. Here's some thoughts.

Because the mountain wasn't high enough? I don't think that mountain was high enough to show the height of God's glory. Because the cleansing blood wasn't powerful enough?

I think that's true. The blood that cleansed the box was just the blood of an animal. And Christ has gone into the real holy place carrying his own blood, his own precious blood, to really cleanse what needed cleansing, particularly us.

[39:32] The temple, that temple was made by human hands. Somebody who would go past it and would say, do you know what Charlie, when I did that corner there, I missed a couple of millimetres off the edge.

Luckily, the king never spotted it. Made by human hands, but the real temple is made not by human hands but by God. God's presence, God's saviour, God's incarnation.

Because the glory prevented worship and service and God's real purpose is to enable worship and service. Not the most important passage in the Bible because the glory revealed the presence of God but also hid the presence of God.

And the reason why we're not told to always think about 1 Kings 8 is we've got something better to always think about. 1 Kings 8 points us in the direction of Jesus. God because his is the height.

The highest place belongs to him. His is the divinity. There's no imperfections with him. And one day his glory will fill not just the temple but the world.

[40:52] The whole of creation will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. And that glory won't stop everything happening but it will be the very environment that all activity goes forward in the world to come.

And we shall see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. So I just stop with a question.

Do we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? Is that where you're already at? Because that's what a Christian is. A Christian is somebody who through the gospel has already seen that the best thing in this world is the promises of God in Jesus.

And shall we see that? Have you got that in your heart that that's the thing you are actually looking forward to? We're often distracted, we're often tempted, we're often all over the place but at root is that what our hearts are set on?

Do we, shall we, are we? The glory of God. Let's sing together number 495. 5.