

Prayer of Dedication

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of October 2004 The preacher is Paul Barker His sermon is entitled Prayer of Dedication and is based on 1 Kings 8 verses 22-53 You may find it helpful to have open the Bibles at page 271 at the beginning of 1 Kings chapter 8 This is the third in our series on Solomon one of the great kings of the Old Testament times Let me pray for us before I begin Heavenly Father we pray that your word will live in us by your spirit bearing fruit for your glory help us not only to understand and believe it but also to heed it and we pray this for the sake of Jesus Christ

Amen After the hard work comes the party and last week we saw elements of the hard work the building over a period of seven years of the temple in the day of Solomon a temple that was large or large-ish I suppose full of ornate carvings of cedar imported from Lebanon as well as lots of gold very beautiful, very lavish, very splendid in its design and we saw last week the structure of it and the symbolism of some of the things to do with the building of the temple and for seven years that was built on a high flat area above the city of David in what is now central Jerusalem the period that we're talking about is about 960 BC so more or less 3,000 years ago Having built it we come now to the celebration of its dedication and opening in chapter 8 It's a typical religious event you know the sorts of things that some people get excited by and some people get quite bored by a long procession lots of dignitaries lots of religious people probably wearing religious clothes lots and lots of talk and very long prayers some people might be excited by that others less so but it's reported for us at least some of it is reported for us here in chapter 8 not only that we know what happened but that we can learn from what happened for our lives today

In a sense the dedication of the temple began when the Ark of the Covenant was taken from its resting place elsewhere in Jerusalem in the city of David a little bit lower down the promontory of Hill from where the temple had been built The Ark of the Covenant as I mentioned last week was a box about so big not huge covered in gold it had statues of cherubim on either side of it and inside this box this Ark of the Covenant were the two tablets of the stones given by God to Moses on top of Mount Sinai and on them were inscribed the Ten Commandments probably smallish stones like one of those electronic palm things except it was far from electronic but probably about the size of your hand they were inside it the priests we're told carried the Ark all the people of Israel were gathered together at the time of this celebration in verse 2 we're told that so we're dealing with several thousand people

King Solomon himself was there of course in taking a leading role all the elders the tribal elders of each tribe and clans within the tribe the chiefs the older men they were there leading part of the procession and it was the priests themselves from the tribe of Levi who would have carried the Ark up from the lower part of the city of David up into the temple precincts through the court through the nave part that we saw last week and into the most holy place the square or cubic central part of the temple there they placed the Ark in the most holy place and then later we're told they left from that area later on in verse 8 or 9 or so so that's the initial start the significance of that is one the Ark contained within it the law so central to the nation and central to the nation's relationship with God was the law of God given by God to the people but secondly it's also symbolic of the presence of God the Ark was not a box in which God was contained it was more the footstool of his throne there was no drawing or symbol or statue for God of course they're strictly forbidden in the Bible rather the Ark is like his footstool a cherubim on either side in a sense framed the space where God was regarded as dwelling above the Ark but in the central part of the temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem in a sense if you like the symbol of God's presence was an empty space surrounded or guarded by cherubim and I explained some of that last week above the Ark no doubt as the priest came out the curtains were closed and the most holy place now had within it the Ark and we read in verse 10 that when the priest came out of the holy place having deposited the Ark of the covenant there we're told in verse 10 a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud you imagine if this place was filled with cloud and you know

I couldn't do anything it would be nice I could go back home and have a rest or something like that this is not a disaster of course this cloud we're told in verse 11 is the glory of the Lord filling the house of the Lord not just the most holy place where the Ark is but the house of the Lord also includes the nave area in front of that where the altar was probably even the vestibule in front of that as well filled with cloud we could describe that as being very high church but it's not quite that the glory of the Lord is cloud that symbolises the presence of God and the deposit of the Ark in a sense deposited the throne of God in the most holy place now that the priests have come out God himself takes up residence in a sense in the temple built by Solomon it's not the first time this language has been used and that's probably significant it's not a new phenomena for Israel going back 400 years when Israel came to Mount Sinai and Moses went up on top of Mount Sinai to receive the law the mountain of Sinai was covered with cloud and there was trumpets and there was darkness and so on the glory of the Lord dwelt on the top of Mount Sinai in the wilderness is in effect what's being described back in Exodus chapter 19 but then in preparation for Israel moving from Mount Sinai through the wilderness into the promised land they were told to build a sort of temporary tent like version of this temple a portable version and when that was completed at the very end of the book of Exodus the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle the portable tent now 400 years later the temple is built and the glory of the Lord fills it as well now in a sense a more permanent dwelling in the midst of God's people for God and yet on the other hand though it symbolises the presence of God and it shows us the generosity of God in coming to be in the midst of a sinful people nonetheless you don't see God you just see cloud though God is present he remains in a sense hidden as well there's both the nearness of God's approach to his people as well as the distance that God keeps from his sinful people both are going on here the whole temple structure is about God coming in the midst of people but also God keeping his distance because he's holy and they're sinners both of those things are true and in a sense the intimacy and approach and closeness of God will only be fully expressed once we arrive perfected in heaven as the end of the Bible describes us so here we've got this element of tension a God who comes close but a God who keeps his distance that is a God who is both holy and therefore we need to keep our distance from him but a God who is full of grace and mercy and who comes and dwells in the midst of his people now the bulk of this chapter is really prayer a prayer by the king

[9 : 08] King Solomon in the hearing of all the people gathered around at the dedication of this temple building many of us find prayer hard I think there are too few Christians who pray persistently and regularly and too many who don't know what to pray when they do pray our prayers are often expressions of some ignorance about God and his purposes often expressions of our selfishness so there's an element here in which Solomon's prayer gives us some clues to praying in general though it's a specific situation and in a sense a unique occasion there are two aspects of Solomon's prayer I want to highlight in general terms the first is that Solomon prays for the promises of God to be fulfilled that's the first thing and it comes in the first section or couple of paragraphs of this chapter see for example in verse 15 Solomon said blessed be the Lord the God of Israel who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to my father David and then he goes on to quote some of that

David was Solomon's father he'd been king for about 40 years from about 1000 to 960 BC roughly and had died Solomon had succeeded to be king and in a very famous passage in the book preceding this in the Bible 2 Samuel chapter 7 God made significant promises to David Solomon is saying here at the beginning of his prayer God has kept some of that promise God has been faithful great is your faithfulness as we've just sung is in effect what Solomon is saying in that verse I just read verse 15 blessed be God because he's kept by his hand what he promised with his mouth to David in particular there are two things two aspects that God has already kept in promise to David verse 20 and 21 the Lord has upheld the promise that he made firstly for I have risen in the place of my father David I sit on the throne of Israel as the Lord promised that is the first part of promise to David was that David's son would be king in his place that's fulfilled

Solomon's ticking it off secondly as verse 20 goes on to say and I have built the house for the name of the Lord the God of Israel there I have provided a place for the ark in which is the covenant of the Lord that he made with our ancestors when he brought them out of the land of Egypt the second thing that God promised David back in 2 Samuel was that David's son not David who'd asked to do it but David's son would build a temple a house for the Lord it's done Solomon's ticking that off too two things so far that God promised David one a successor two the building of the temple by his son both done so in effect the beginning of Solomon's prayer is giving thanks to God praising God for keeping promise that's important I call this and then there's a third aspect of promise that is yet to be fulfilled we see Solomon picking that up in verse 25 therefore O Lord God of Israel keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him saying there shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel if only your children look to their way to walk before me as you have walked before me therefore O God of Israel let your word be confirmed which you promised to your servant my father David the third thing that God had promised David is yet to be fulfilled that is an eternal dynasty not just a son to succeed him but that beyond that son

Solomon as it turns out to be there will continue to be a descendant of David on the throne of Israel forever Solomon's prayer you see here is ticking off two things done praising God for faithfulness to promise and on the basis of that faithfulness praying that God will keep on being faithful and fulfil the third and final thing promised to David that is an eternal dynasty of successors to David on the throne of Israel now I call this sort of prayer a hi-fi prayer a hi-fi system plays us music the idea behind the language hi-fi is that the sound system is of high fidelity high faithfulness to the original sound of the music Solomon's prayer here we could call a hi-fi prayer that is he's acknowledging the high level of fidelity of God to what God has promised and therefore praying that God will fulfil the remaining promises or promise in this case he acknowledges promises already fulfilled and gives thanks for them and prays therefore that God will fulfil the remaining promises and there I think is a model an important model for us in our praying it presupposes that we know the promises of God too often

Christians are too ignorant of God's promises and we pray that God will do X Y and Z thinking that God will do it but God may not have promised to do X Y and Z Solomon knows what God has promised either from his reading of the Bible into Samuel or from hearing from his father David what God had promised or both Solomon therefore knowing his Bible knows what God has promised gives thanks for fulfilment already and prays that God will fulfil the remaining promises now the example for us I think is clear we ought to know the promises of God give thanks for those that are fulfilled and pray for the fulfilment of those yet remaining and the Bible is how we find out the answers to that that is that reading our Bibles ought to inform enrich and deepen our prayer life it ought to give us more confidence in our prayer life we ought to be able to see more of the character and purposes and promises of God and therefore pray as a result and for us of course 3000 years after Solomon there's much more that's been fulfilled for us than was the case for Solomon but there remains yet more promises of God yet to be fully fulfilled namely the return of Jesus to take all of God's people into God's perfect presence forever and other associated promises of vindication judgment and so on they're the sorts of things that this prayer should be hinting at for our prayers that we pray high-fi prayers trusting in the high fidelity of God to his promises now in this respect the God of the Bible is unique we often think as

[16 : 08] Christians that God is unique he is the only God and that he's different from all gods of other religions he's sovereign he's made everything he sent his son to die for us and so on all of that of course is fundamentally true but at the point of God being faithful to what he promises God is unique incomparable as Solomon says in verse 23 O Lord God of Israel there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath in what respect is there no God like God keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart no other ancient religion had a God who made promises and kept them no other modern religion is the same as that in ancient religions their gods were fickle not faithful their gods were capricious not covenant keeping you never knew where you stood with ancient gods like many other religions today never quite know how they stand with their gods but the God of the Bible our God the God and Father of our Lord

Jesus Christ is very clear that he not only makes promises but he always keeps them and the Bible from beginning to end is substantial evidence for that it ought to engender great confidence in us as we pray and as we trust in the fulfilment of the promises of God of course all too often as we look around our world we wonder is God actually keeping his promises but the evidence of the Bible shows us that in God's time in God's way in unexpected ways sometimes God does keep every single promise he's made and he urges us to pray for their fulfilment indeed as the Lord's prayer says we pray for God's kingdom to come which is actually praying that God keeps his promise to bring finally that kingdom at the end of time so therefore we should pray confidently when I was 10 or 11 or thereabouts I guess I used to watch after school the program I Dream of Jeannie it's pretty dated now

I think I remember hearing that Jeannie in that program was the first time a woman's belly button was ever seen on TV very daring I suppose but anyway in case you've never seen the program or have forgotten because it was a long time ago this astronaut character had a Jeannie in a bottle that he found and when he rubbed the bottle out came a Jeannie and she did all sorts of bizarre things sometimes at his request now even in that silly TV program the Jeannie could never quite be contained in the bottle she was slightly rebellious and that was part of the humour of this American comedy and so periodically she would sort of do things that the astronaut master of her didn't want her to do and so on she couldn't be quite bottled up all the time well if that's the case for a Jeannie in a silly American TV program it's even more the case with God the God that Solomon is praying to here the God who is faithful the God who is not contained even in a grand temple in

Jerusalem but he's not even contained in the vastness of the heaven of heavens see what Solomon says in verse 27 will God indeed dwell on the earth even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you much less this house that I have built so here again we've got this sense of tension where God is taking up some form of residence in the centre of the temple and yet the temple cannot contain God and Solomon says not even the heaven of heavens can contain God God is vaster than even this whole universe which he's made he's not contained by anything that humans have made let alone being contained by anything that God has made either so vast is he and yet Solomon can pray to that God with confidence certainty and clarity it's a good point for us I think because sometimes we struggle to think that the God of this universe this vast God would hear our prayers would listen to even you or me and yet here we find the availability and willingness of

God to heed the prayers of not just a king even but of any person who comes to pray that's behind the remainder of the chapter so that's the first general point I suppose Solomon prays for the fulfilment of God's promises to a God who is already manifestly faithful that prayer is grounded in Solomon's understanding of God's promises in the scriptures so to the second point Solomon prays fundamentally for mercy and again his prayer for mercy is grounded in the revelation of God in the scriptures he's not just praying for mercy because he's desperate or his people are desperate he's praying for mercy with confidence because of what God has said about and revealed about himself in the scriptures already if you look at the very end of verse 30 Solomon's prayer says oh here in heaven your dwelling place heed and forgive through that little paragraph 27 to 30 which is the preliminary in a sense to the paragraphs that follow the key thing he's asking

[21 : 39] God to do is not only hear but forgive it's a prayer fundamentally for mercy and four times later the idea or the request for forgiveness occurs there are seven scenarios that follow from verse 31 to 53 each of them is structured the same way if such and such happens and somebody or some people pray towards the temple then God hear from heaven and heed the prayer sometimes that's deliberately directly forgiveness other times it's to maintain the cause of the person or bring restoration or whatever the case is not each of the seven cases involve sin needing forgiveness but most of them do seven scenarios each time there is some form of dilemma each time some person or persons hypothetically turns towards the temple to pray and the request each of the seven times is that

God hears not that God's confined in the temple but that God is actually in heaven you pray towards the temple and God in heaven will hear and heed your prayer the temple doesn't show where God's confined rather it's an expression of his availability and willingness to hear and heed the prayers now the seven scenarios that are painted for us it's not an exhaustive list it's meant to be exemplary so that in all sorts of situations people are encouraged to pray towards the temple the first one is somebody who sins against a neighbour verse 31 and you can see in the passage how these are broken up paragraph by paragraph more or less someone sins against a neighbour is given an oath to swear and comes and swears before your altar in this house, then hear in heaven and act and judge. So somebody's done something wrong, they've sinned against a neighbour in general terms, they make an oath and it's calling God to hear from heaven their prayer. In the second one, again there is sin. This time the people are defeated in battle because of their sin. In response to their defeat, they confess their sins, they turn to the temple, they pray and the request is again God, hear from heaven your people and forgive their sin.

Verse 34. In the third case, verse 35, that paragraph, this time the situation is a drought, the heavens have shut up, there's been no rain. In response to that problem, some people at least of the people of God have been prompted to pray, confess their sin and so on and so it's a request to hear their prayers and forgive their sins.

The fourth situation, similarly, this time it's famine or blight or mildew or plague, some form of agricultural disaster, not dissimilar from a drought, this is verse 37 onwards and this time again, the request is, verse 39, here in heaven your dwelling place, forgive and act and heed the prayers of the people.

The fifth scenario is very different, striking actually in being so different. This time it's a foreigner who prays, not an Israelite, someone from another country.

[25 : 05] We're not quite sure of the situation, that doesn't matter, it's not actually a case of sin necessarily. They've heard of God's great name, they've come, they've prayed towards the house, they may not even be in the land, although probably that's what's meant by them coming in verse 42, but they're praying and it's requesting God will even heed their prayers.

It might be an Egyptian, a Babylonian, an Assyrian, someone from the enemy, but it's a request that even a foreigner's prayer would be heard by God. The sixth scenario is back to battle, not necessarily a defeat, it could be victory, defeat or it could be just in the midst of the contest.

Again, asking God to hear the prayers. It's not, never is it asking God to do something without the people praying. Always the scenario is a situation which has prompted people to pray and it's always asking God to heed those prayers.

The last scenario is the longest, the most significant, the climax of the sequence. This time, the situation is that the people have sinned and that has led them not just to defeat by their enemy, but to actually being cast out of the land into exile.

Eventually, of course, that happens 400 years later when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. Now, most of these situations have got elements of sin, needing confession and repentance and asking God to heed and to forgive, in effect, those prayers.

[26 : 34] The situations show that it's not just the king who can pray, but anyone can pray, not the leaders or the elders or the priests alone, but any person, even a foreigner. Anyone could pray towards the temple and expect to hear, to know that God would hear and heed their prayer.

Notice that you don't have to go to the temple to pray. You could even be out of the land because the last scenario portrays Israel in exile. They could be way off in Babylon or Egypt or somewhere far, far away, but the scenario is that from even in exile, out of the land, they will turn towards the temple and pray and God in heaven would hear and heed their prayer.

Now, behind Solomon's examples here in his prayer of dedication, in urging us as well to pray, comes not just desperation of the need of God's help, but comes rather a robust biblical hope which prompts his prayer.

When Solomon each time is praying that God will heed and hear the prayer, when God will extend mercy and forgiveness, it's not just a desperate cry to God out there somewhere, hear my prayer, but again it's grounded in the knowledge of God in the Scriptures.

That's what's motivating Solomon's prayer for mercy just as it motivated his prayer for God to keep his promises as we saw earlier on. Let me illustrate what I mean by that.

[28 : 01] The situation of an enemy defeat in the second scenario, the situation of no rain in the third, of a famine or blight or mildew in the fourth scenario, of battle in the sixth and of exile in the seventh, are all threats issued by God back in Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the time of Moses to the people if they sinned.

These are the things that will happen. You can read it in Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28, what are called covenant curses. Having given the law, God makes it clear to the people that if you don't obey the law then you can expect to be defeated in battle, you can expect a drought or blight or mildew or plague or famine or even in the end exile away from the land.

All of those things will be God's punishment for the people's sin. But that's not the final word even in Deuteronomy and Leviticus because as Deuteronomy 29 and 30 goes on to make clear that even when all those disasters happen and the people may be in exile away from the land, then if God's words lead them to repent, he will heed and bring them back.

Solomon is praying in the knowledge of the Scriptures. He knows what God is like because of the Scriptures telling him. He knows that God is holy and will punish sin that may culminate in exile but on the other hand beyond that he knows that God is merciful and will hear the prayers of his people who confess their sins.

So Solomon's prayer here knows God as revealed in the Scriptures and again there's this emphasis for us that if our prayers are to be enriched and deepened and informed then we need to know God as revealed in the Scriptures and pray accordingly.

[29 : 58] This dedicatory prayer at the opening of the temple and the great party and festivity that goes on is ruthlessly realistic about Israel. See there's no foolish flattery here.

We people of Israel, we've got a temple. We'll be right. We'll do the right thing. We'll be a glorious nation. None of that. The whole prayer suggests that the people will fail and sin. Gloomy perhaps but ultimately optimistic not because of Israel but because of God's mercy as already revealed in the Scriptures.

So here are lessons for prayer for us. It's one of the high points of the Old Testament, the dedication of the temple. The presence of God in the midst of his people yet some distance because they remain sinners.

God not confined in the temple but still the God of heaven, unique and incomparable. Prayer is an essential part of our Christian life and many of us struggle with it. The example here for us is to ground our prayers in the Scriptures so that we know God, his purposes, his plans, his character and we pray as a result in response accordingly.

Prayer that's grounded in the faithfulness of God, grounded in the mercy of God, grounded in the availability of God to hear and heed our prayer. 3,000 years after Solomon prayed this prayer, there's no temple for us to turn to.

[31 : 27] The building was destroyed 400 years later by the Babylonians who whisked the leadership off into exile. 70 years later, rebuilt, destroyed soon after Jesus' death by the Romans in 70 AD, never built again.

Does that mean these words are now irrelevant? How are we to turn towards a temple? Should we have oriented our building so that we're facing Jerusalem, whichever way that is? It's a bit hard for me to work it out on a Sunday morning.

Like Muslims pray towards facing towards Mecca, should we be facing towards Jerusalem? The place where the temple used to be? Great David's greater son said, destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days.

And he was talking about his body and his resurrection from the dead. There's no building of temple that concerns us anymore, but there is a risen Lord, a living temple into whom we're being built as part of that living temple.

And it's to him that we turn and we pray. As Solomon turned towards a building, housing in a sense the presence of God, so we turn towards the presence of God in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

[32 : 47] Our prayers to God the Father are through Jesus Christ and for his sake and in his name. It is because of the blood of Jesus shed for us that we can have confidence to approach the most, the throne of grace and pray and expect God to hear.

We don't have to worry about geography of facing Jerusalem or looking for some building or even going in a building to pray. The risen Lord Jesus is the fulfilment of this temple.

As to him, through him, that we pray to God our Heavenly Father. Amen.