

“Circles”

1 Kings 8:54-61 ¹

One of the more challenging parts of preaching is deciding on the text for a particular sermon; and beyond that, the larger challenge is determining the trajectory of preaching over a longer period. It's not generally good practice to decide on a topic and then go looking for a text, nor is it the best practice to choose scriptures randomly, because in either case, the preacher is quite likely to select texts that are easier to work with, avoiding texts that are difficult.

A primary goal for preaching over a period of years in one congregation is to preach “the whole counsel of God's Word,” addressing the whole panorama of biblical revelation as best one can. It is with this goal in mind that many faith groups use prescribed texts, often called a “lectionary,” so that major doctrines are covered every couple of years.

Using a lectionary removes the problem of what text to work with, but I've never been inclined to let someone else choose my texts for me. Some pastors preach “the whole counsel of the Word” by going verse-by-verse through a book, and at least one famous pastor preached through the whole Bible, verse-by-verse, for forty years! I like going verse-by-verse in teaching the Bible, whether in a weekly class or in a special study, but I've never liked that as an approach to Sunday morning.

Over the years, the approach I've preferred to preaching “the whole counsel of the Word” has been to move through the Bible more quickly, taking each book in turn. I've preached through the Bible book-by-book, trying to capture the essential message of each document in a sermon or two . . . or three. I've preached through the Bible choosing texts that I'd never, ever preached on before—usually the more difficult texts. I've zoomed through the Bible in ten weeks, trying to give a “bird's-eye” view of the whole biblical landscape.

What we're doing at the moment is going through the Bible, one sermon per book, just looking for something “interesting” to highlight as we go along. I want to give you a feel for the trajectory of Scripture, which is what I'll be doing in a different way during the evening Bible studies that will soon begin.

So it is that we come this morning to 1 Kings. You'll remember that 1 Samuel is primarily about Samuel and Saul. 2 Samuel is mostly about David. And the books of Kings summarize the history of Israel from Solomon until the Exile, a period of about four hundred years.

In pondering what to talk about with you from 1 Kings, I was struck by Solomon's prayer of dedication for the Temple. This may well be the longest prayer recorded in the Bible,² and I discovered that I've never used it as a text before. And, as often happens when beginning work on a sermon, my first thought was that I'd have a hard time talking about this for thirty minutes. Then, as invariably happens after study, I realized that there's a lot more here than I can do justice to in so short a time. So here we go

(As a side note, when I chose the title for this sermon, I didn't expect to spend the whole sermon talking about Solomon's prayer, as I'm going to do. The “circles” idea will have to be developed in this week's Laptop)

You probably remember that God instructed Moses to construct a large, elaborate tent with a large enclosure around it during the forty years Israel spent in the wilderness.³ The

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 1, 2019.

² Other very long prayers are found in Nehemiah 9 and John 17. One might also consider most of the psalms to be prayers.

³ Exodus 26

purpose of this tent was to house the Ark of the Covenant, in which the tablets of the Ten Commandments were housed, and to represent the Presence of God among the people of Israel.

This tent, called “the Tabernacle,” moved with the nation during the wilderness wanderings. Once the conquest of Canaan had begun, the Tabernacle was set up at Shiloh, where it remained for about two hundred years. Later, the Tabernacle was moved to Gibeon, which is where it was during David’s reign over the United Kingdom.⁴

David wanted to build a more permanent house for the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem, his capital city, and he gathered the necessary materials for such construction. After everything was gathered, though, God told David that Solomon, the son who would become king after him, would actually be the one who would build this more permanent structure, known as “the Temple.” The prayer that we’re considering today was the prayer of dedication Solomon offered at the dedication of that structure, probably about the year 950 B.C. The prayer begins at 1 Kings 8:22. You may want to have your Bible open as we look at it.

Although 1 Kings was probably first written some years before,⁵ the document appears to have taken its current shape during the period of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C. The Books of Kings were originally on one scroll,⁶ and one of their primary objectives was to explain the Exile in terms of God’s righteous judgment on Israel for its idolatry and apostasy.

The dedication of Solomon’s Temple⁷ was the “high-water mark” both of Solomon’s reign and of Israel’s history. After this magnificent moment, the long, sad decline toward destruction and exile would soon begin.

1 Kings 6 describes the construction of the Temple and the courts that surrounded it. 1 Kings 7 describes the manufacture of the various furnishings of the Temple and its courts (such as the Altar and the bronze Sea, among other things).⁸ And 1 Kings 8 describes the dedication ceremony for the whole enterprise.⁹

We’re told that the Temple was completed in the eighth month of the Jewish calendar, but that it wasn’t dedicated until the seventh month of the next year.¹⁰ There may have been several reasons for this. The most obvious reason may be that it took the better part of a year to fabricate the Temple furnishings after the building itself had been completed.

A more subtle reason for the delay may have been that the annual Festival of Shelters, or Tabernacles, took place in the seventh month (Ezekiel 45:25). The Festival of Shelters had taken on the meaning of God’s giving Israel “rest” from the wilderness wanderings and from their

⁴ Joshua 18:1; 2 Chronicles 1:3-5

⁵ Tradition ascribes it to Jeremiah in the 7th century, B.C.

⁶ As were the Books of Samuel and Chronicles.

⁷ As distinct from the Second Temple, a less imposing structure built after the Exile, which Herod’s renovations eventually turned into one of the “wonders” of the ancient world until its destruction by the Roman Army in A.D. 70.

⁸ Solomon took seven years to build the Temple, but we’re told that he took *thirteen* years to build his own residence!

⁹ 1 Kings 8 is structured chiastically:

narrative action (transfer of ark) ([vv. 1-13](#))

theological commentary ([vv. 14-21](#))

prayer for the dynasty ([vv. 22-26](#))

transition in ([vv. 27-30](#))

seven petition prayer ([vv. 31-51](#))

transition out ([vv. 52-53](#))

theological commentary ([vv. 54-61](#))

narrative action (sacrifices) ([vv. 62-66](#))

¹⁰ 1 Kings 6:38, 8:2.

enemies (Joshua 1:13), and dedicating the Temple during that season would highlight its significance as the symbolic culmination of such “rest.”

1 Kings 8:2 points out that Solomon gathered the people during this festival and, with great ceremony, had the Tabernacle and its contents brought from Gibeon to Jerusalem and placed in the Temple. Apparently the tent of the Tabernacle, now several hundred years old, was kept and stored somewhere in the Temple precincts (8:4).

Great numbers of sheep and oxen were sacrificed in honor of this occasion (and to feed the great crowds thus assembled), and the Ark of the Covenant was solemnly placed within the Most Holy Place, under the overspreading wings of the huge golden Cherubim.¹¹ Once the Ark of the Covenant had been placed and the priests had left the Most Holy Place, the cloud of God’s Glory—the same Cloud that had led the people through the wilderness—filled the Temple as the sign of God’s approval and blessing (8:10), just as it had at the completion of the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35).

Solomon had had a great platform built for this occasion (2 Chronicles 6:13), and he ascended this platform to speak to the people. The pomp and ceremony attending this occasion would have been much like what we see at the inauguration of our Presidents.¹²

Solomon began his address to the nation by noting that this day marked God’s honoring of the promise to create a dynasty after David’s “name” as well as the creation of a house of worship in which “God’s Name” would dwell. The writers of the Older Testament were very careful not to say that Yahweh actually lived within either the Tabernacle or the Temple. God’s dwelling place was in “heaven,” and only God’s “Name” and blessing were represented or “placed” in a particular physical location.

After his opening remarks, Solomon stood and lifted his hands to heaven, a common posture for prayer, and began this longest of prayers recorded in Scripture. Solomon was rather overcome by the moment as he began: “*O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart; you have kept with your servant David my father what you declared to him. You spoke with your mouth, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day*” (8:23-24).

The essence of Solomon’s prayer was simple—that God might always recognize this Temple and its sacrifices as the vehicle for forgiveness and restitution, both for individuals and for the nation. Citing a sequence of seven judgments similar to those noted in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, Solomon asked repeatedly that if the people sinned—which they would—and if they then repented—which they might—would the LORD please accept their repentance and restore them to fellowship with God.

The sequence of Solomon’s seven-fold prayer went like this:

vv. 31-32	When Making an Oath
vv. 33-34	When Defeated by an Enemy
vv. 35-36	When Overcome by Drought
vv. 37-40	When Overcome by Famine, Plague . . . or Whatever
vv. 41-43	When Foreigners and Immigrants seek the Living God

¹¹ We’re told that the only things in the Ark at this point were the two stone tablets of the Commandments (8:9). See also Exodus 16:32-34, 25:16, 21; Numbers 17:10-11; Deuteronomy 10:1-2; 2 Chronicles 5:10; Hebrews 9:4.

¹² One commentator noted that “Ceremony is the means by which ordinary objects receive sacred significance.” I thought that was well-put.

vv. 44-45 When Offering Prayer in Battle
 vv. 46-51 When Repenting in Exile

As they were recorded here, Solomon's words about repentance while in exile were twice as lengthy as any of his other petitions. Although the possibility of exile was hypothetical when the Temple was dedicated, the recipients of this document centuries later were most likely experiencing such exile themselves, and by recording Solomon's words in this way, the author was offering the hope of forgiveness if their repentance was real.

As Solomon concluded his prayer, its scope became even more expansive. This was the text with which we began earlier in our reading of Scripture:

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 toward 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. 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 8:54-61).*

The first thing to notice here is that Solomon acknowledged that forgiveness and fellowship with God are dependent on the condition and attitude of our hearts, for which sacrifices are simply the sign and symbol. This was good news for the exiles, because the Temple had now been destroyed and they were in captivity far away from home. They were being reminded that what really mattered about their relationship with God was not ritual but repentance—and that's just as true today as it was then.

The second thing to notice in Solomon's concluding statement is that he included us in this prayer when he spoke of “*all the peoples of the earth.*” That's Good News, too!

Beyond these two things, it's important to realize that the sequences of judgments outlined in Leviticus, in Deuteronomy, in Solomon's prayer, and in similar sequences elsewhere in Scripture are all designed to elicit repentance, a turning of the heart from “the far country of the spirit,” and a return to fellowship with God.¹³ As the severity of judgments increases, both then and now, the Hope of God's heart is that the pain of these judgments would cause us to turn back before it becomes too late.¹⁴ Examples are many. Here are just three:

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,”

¹³ This was the case even with the plagues upon Egypt.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis put this memorably when he wrote that “The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it. Now error and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence; they are masked evil. Pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil; every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt And pain is not only immediately recognizable evil, but evil impossible to ignore. We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities . . . but pain insists upon being attended to. **God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to a deaf world**” (*The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 92).

so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. As has just been said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion" (Hebrews 3:12-15).

Say to them, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11).

And our Lord Jesus wept over Jerusalem as He said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:37-38).¹⁵

We've noted already that when the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Most Holy Place, the Glory of God filled the Temple. Now, when Solomon concluded this lengthy prayer, we're told that *fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices* (2 Chronicles 7:1). This was a clear and unmistakable sign that God had accepted the King's prayer on behalf of the nation.

In the end, this complex chapter is less about the character of the temple than it is about the nature of Israel's God. This is a trustworthy God who can be counted on to hold to the covenant and to keep His promises.¹⁶ This is a gracious God, providing a Temple so that Israel could have access to divine favor.¹⁷ This God has chosen Israel as a special people through the exodus,¹⁸ through the covenant law,¹⁹ and through the gift of the land.²⁰

This God is serious about obedience,²¹ and the consequences of disobedience are huge, even to the point of exile and national destruction.²² Yet this is also a God whose forgiving nature is good news to exiles who maintain their distinction from their pagan neighbors through their obedience to the law.²³ This God, the One True God, answers prayer, even prayer from the land of captivity. The message of this prayer for the exiles is that if they repent whole-heartedly, this God will forgive them and give them "*a hope and a future.*"²⁴

And the Good News for you and for me this morning is that if we also repent whole-heartedly, this same God—our God—made known to us in Jesus through His Spirit, will forgive us and give us, too, "*a hope and a future,*" of which the Table of the Lord is one sure and gracious sign. To that Table we now turn.

¹⁵ See also Luke 19:41-44.

¹⁶ vv. 15, 20, 23-24, 56, 66

¹⁷ vv. 12-13, 17-21, 27-29

¹⁸ vv. 16, 51

¹⁹ vv. 9, 21, 53

²⁰ vv. 34, 36, 40, 48

²¹ vv. 58, 61

²² v. 46

²³ v. 53

²⁴ vv. 47-50; Jeremiah 29:11