

Prayer of Dedication

1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11) 22-30, 41-43

¹ Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion... ⁶ Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim... ¹⁰ And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹ so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD...

²² Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³ He said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴ the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. 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.' ²⁶ Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

²⁷ "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! ²⁸ Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; ²⁹ that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. ³⁰ Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive...

⁴¹ "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ⁴² —for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, ⁴³ then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built."

This was a glorious day. In many ways it was reminiscent of the occasion when Solomon's father David was made king of Israel and Judah. After David was crowned king of Israel and Judah, he had the ark of the covenant brought to Jerusalem. The relocation of the ark to Jerusalem in David's day was the

culmination of his coronation. The ark was a symbol of Israel's covenant with God and the presence of God in their midst. Therefore, as it relates to Solomon, the presence of the ark of the covenant at the dedication of the temple served to legitimize his kingship. Under Solomon's leadership, the ark of the covenant would not be housed in a tent. It would be placed in an opulent inner sanctuary of the temple, which took seven years and thousands of forced-labor hours to build.

When Solomon assumed the throne, he confessed to God that he was only a boy and needed wisdom to rule the people. Evidence that God granted him wisdom was demonstrated in his rhetoric in his speech and prayer at the dedication of the temple. In his speech, Solomon not only acknowledged Israel's past but embraced it, while allowing his very presence to symbolize Israel's future. His repeated use of the phrase "your servant David my father" reminded the people that he was David's son, while helping them transition from a reign sustained by a culture of war to one of peace. With the speech Solomon was communicating to the people that though his reign would be very different, it would be no less blessed than the reign of his father. **Debra J. Mumford**

This text includes part of a lengthy prayer of seven petitions by Solomon (vv. 22-53) on the occasion of the dedication of the temple. The prayer is enclosed by Solomon's blessing of the assembly (vv. 14-21, 54-61), in which the fulfillment of God's promises to David and Moses is highlighted, concluding with a call to obedience (v. 61).

The prayer's introduction (vv. 22-26) and conclusion (v. 53) center on God's incomparability and God's keeping the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:1-17), both now and into the future. God's faithfulness surrounds and grounds the prayer petitions. God's people can pray in confidence because God is a promise keeper. At the same time, Israel's repentance and faithfulness to God remain integral to the relationship (vv. 23, 61).

Solomon is about to celebrate the greatest achievement of his administration—the dedication of the temple. Solomon's father, King David, was prevented from building a suitable "home" for God, the task was left to Solomon, and he did it! Countless sheep and oxen are sacrificed, and all elders and heads of tribes are brought in as witnesses to the procession in which priests carry the ark of the covenant from Zion to Jerusalem to the inner sanctum of the temple called the Holy of Holies. As the priests emerge, we are told that the temple is filled by a cloud signifying that the glory of the Lord fills the place.

The temple is a symbol of great importance. A motley crew of men, women, and children now can exhale, for they finally have arrived at their destination, a homeland. They had been a nomadic people, adrift and lost for generations. They fought strange people who were occupying the land that God had promised to their ancestors. They marched through a long history that started with their cries in Egypt, filled a wilderness wandering with their murmurings, and left them unsettled as they sought ways to govern themselves. Solomon understands the importance of the hour. As a leader, he knows what to do. He assembles the people, all the people. He brings the ark of the covenant to be placed in the inner sanctuary of the temple. He witnesses the mystery of God's presence in the thick cloud that fills the temple. He offers a prayer.

It is meaningful that Solomon prays; in this action, he invites all, the leaders and the masses, to pray also. The monarch stands before the altar of God, in the presence of all the people, and he prays—for himself, for Israel, and for all people, including the foreigners in their midst.

Solomon's prayer is poignant and personal. He praises God for all God has done for Israel's ancestors. He acknowledges that God is too great to be confined—not on earth and certainly not in a house built by human hands. Solomon entreats God to lend an ear whenever prayers rise from and toward the temple, the place where

God's name is revered—not just the prayers of the people of Israel. He invokes God's care for anyone who lifts up prayers in the shadow of the temple where God's name resides.

Through his dedication ceremony, Solomon offers us a holistic spirituality. In the city, the center of the nation, and in the temple, the center of religious life, Solomon begins a new phase of his administration by praying. In this seminal act, Solomon brings together the ruler, the city, the temple, and the people, linking them into a web of mutuality and accountability with God and neighbor.

The first action in the temple is the placing of the ark in the Holy of Holies. God's military presence now resides in the deepest chamber of the temple. The second action is prayer. Solomon, the ruler of the nation, makes it clear that the temple is the place of prayer for all people. The building is important because it houses the assembled masses. The temple is the place where the people gather to learn about God and to wait for God's presence to be made real and clear.

Solomon's act of prayer is a reminder to us that the church is not where God is confined, waiting for our orders for a rich, easy life. Rather, the church is where we gather to encounter the living God. It is the place where God meets us, where we can know and be known by God and each other. It is where we come into God's presence as the gathered community to worship, pray, and offer thanksgiving.

Today, many are wrestling with changes in how people understand church. Some now speak about clusters or gatherings of people and are looking for ways to eliminate bricks and mortar. As we read the Bible carefully, we will remember that God has never been tied to an edifice. The whole earth is not big enough for God, let alone a building.

Solomon's prayer brings us back to what we already know: that God's love and care are expansive, inclusive, and abundant. In the African American church tradition, we speak of a God whose power and presence are "so high, we can't get

over it; so wide, we can't go around it; so deep, we can't go under it." We gather in a building and in community to remind us that we belong to God; to hear stories about a God who makes and keeps promises; to rehearse our history with a God who neither sleeps nor slumbers; to witness to a God who hears and answers prayers; to understand that God beckons to all people.

In this text, we are reminded that leaders set the tone. If the leader acknowledges God in all things, so will the people. If the leader is a person of prayer, the people will be too. If the leader reveres a power, presence, and mystery, the people will also. In his act of dedicating the temple, Solomon speaks volumes to the people—the leaders and followers. God is too big for us to define and confine. The temple and the church are the places where we assemble and wait for God.

The temple, like the church, is a symbol pointing to a bigger reality—that God hears the prayers of all; that we can depend on God to be there when we call; and that all are welcome to join in the celebration and prayer.

The foreigners of whom Solomon speaks may refer primarily to the numerous travelers who made their way through Israel. They have heard of Israel's God by reputation, namely, the great deeds done on behalf of Israel. This renown may draw some of these outsiders to Jerusalem and the temple, where they offer prayer. Solomon gives God two good reasons to answer the foreigner's prayer: "so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you... and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house" (v. 43). In other words, the way in which God responds to these people's prayers is considered a key factor in drawing them into the community of faith; the foreigners would come to fear the Lord and realize that God's presence is indeed associated with this temple now being dedicated. The objective: so that "all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other." **Terence E. Fretheim**

If Solomon could ask God to acknowledge and answer the prayers of the foreigner, then surely we as Christians can build upon Solomon's prayers in a world sorely in need of inclusivity. The world in which we live needs people who are firmly rooted in their faith traditions but willing talk with and learn from people of other faiths. Being people of God is not about owning God. Rather it is about glorifying God in all that we do—including the ways we relate to people who are different from us and believe differently than we do. Our scripture teaches us that cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue is a part of what God calls us to be about! **Debra J. Mumford**

Solomon may not have been a religious leader, but there is much we learn and look to possibilities: the place where we gather is the place where we slow down and offer space for God to enter into our lives and our hearts. It is the place where we welcome the stranger in our midst. It is the place where we embrace each other as sister and brother. It is the place where we worship and offer praise to God. It is the place where we pray. Thanks be to God. **Barbara J. Essex**

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