

Solomon Dedicates the Temple

Devotional Reading: Psalm 34:11–22
Background Scripture: 1 Kings 8:22–53

1 Kings 8:22–24, 37–39, 46, 48–50a

22 And Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven:

23 And he said, LORD God of Israel, There is no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart:

24 Who hast kept with thy servant David my father that thou promisedst him: thou spakest also with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thine hand, as it is this day.

37 If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be;

38 What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house:

39 Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest; (for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men;)

46 If they sin against thee, (for there is no man that sinneth not,) and thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captives unto the land of the enemy, far or near;

48 And so return unto thee with all their heart, and with all their soul, in the land of their enemies, which led them away captive, and pray unto thee toward their land, which thou gavest unto their fathers, the city which thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for thy name:

49 Then hear thou their prayer and their supplication in heaven thy dwelling place, and maintain their cause,

50a And forgive thy people that have sinned against thee.¹

Key Text

What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house: Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place.—1 Kings 8:38–39a

Worship in the Covenant Community

Unit 1: Leaders Set Worship Example

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Solomon’s prayer.
2. Analyze the structure and movement of Solomon’s prayer at the temple dedication.
3. Write a prayer to dedicate the congregation’s meeting place(s) to the Lord.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Consecration? Dedication?
- B. Lesson Context

I. Impassioned Prayer (1 Kings 8:22–24)

- A. Solomon’s Postures (v. 22)
- B. God’s Uniqueness (vv. 23–24)

II. Oppressive Circumstances (1 Kings 8:37–39)

- A. Sword, Famine, Plague (vv. 37–38)
Turn First?
- B. Hear, Forgive, Act (v. 39)

III. Inevitable Sin (1 Kings 8:46, 48–50a)

- A. Anger, Captivity, Exile (v. 46)
- B. Hear, Sustain, Forgive (vv. 48–50a)
Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Conclusion

- A. People as Sinners
- B. God as Defender
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

apartheiduh-*par*-tate.

Babylon*Bab*-uh-lun.

Corinthians*Ko-rin*-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.*

Gentiles *jen-tiles.*

Mahatma Gandhi *Muh-hot-muh Gone-dee.*

Septuagint *Sep-too-ih-jent.*

Introduction

A. Consecration? Dedication?

Years ago, a young preacher just out of seminary was setting up for an evening audio-visual presentation in the church sanctuary. He needed a place to put the equipment, and he eventually spotted the ideal place: the communion table. But as he began moving it into place, his wife warned him, “That’s the communion table.”

The self-confident preacher knew that, of course. But he also knew that, ultimately, the table was just an ornate piece of wood. So what if its normal use was to hold the trays of the communion elements? Couldn’t it serve other functions as well?

But his wife stepped up her caution by stressing again that “*That’s the communion table!*” In so doing, she recognized something that her husband hadn’t: the existence of a disposition of many in the congregation who considered some things to be consecrated (or set apart) for certain tasks only.

Various words describing the concept of consecration occur over 250 times in the Old Testament. It is an act by which a person or thing is set apart for service to God (examples: Exodus 29:44; Leviticus 8:10). In the New Testament era, however, the idea of consecration applies to just people, not to things. Even so, there exist issues of conscience in this regard. So the preacher wisely heeded his wife’s warning.

B. Lesson Context

The ceremony in 1 Kings 8 consecrated the newly built temple in Jerusalem. Temple construction had begun in 966 BC and required seven years for completion (1 Kings 6:1, 38). That completion in 959 BC marked an important transition in Israelite history, as the location of encounter with the holy God became immovable, with the temple replacing the portable tabernacle. The first half of Solomon’s 40-year reign was focused on building the temple and palace (9:10). Today’s lesson from 1 Kings 8 considers a portion of the dedication prayer at the ceremony for the finished temple, over which King Solomon presided.

Several preparatory elements led up to this prayer: the temple had been completely furnished (1 Kings 7:13–51), the ark of the covenant had been brought into the temple (8:1–9), and the king had “blessed all the congregation of Israel” (8:14). The prayer of dedication that followed (8:23–53) is the second longest prayer in the Bible—in the neighborhood of 1,000 words! (The parallel in 2 Chronicles 6:14–42 is of similar length.) Only the prayer in Nehemiah 9:5–38 is longer.

But the prayer's oversized length doesn't mean that King Solomon merely rambled on and on (compare Matthew 6:7). Quite the opposite: the prayer is clearly organized. We see that organization in 9 of the prayer's 31 verses selected for today's study.

I. Impassioned Prayer (1 Kings 8:22–24)

A. Solomon's Postures (v. 22)

22. And Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven.

The standing posture of prayer Solomon adopts is the most commonly seen in ancient Near Eastern art. Other postures, especially kneeling or prostration, were legitimate, of course (examples: 1 Chronicles 29:20; 2 Chronicles 29:29). And by the time Solomon concludes the prayer, he will have switched from standing to kneeling (1 Kings 8:54; the changeover is explained more fully in 2 Chronicles 6:12–13).

In both postures, the fact that Solomon extended *his hands toward heaven* adds an aura of solemnity and earnestness (compare Exodus 9:29; Deuteronomy 32:40–41; Lamentations 3:41; Daniel 12:7). It reflects the idea of God as being far “above” creation, not just spatially but also figuratively. Humans look “up” to God, seeking help during their hour of need (Deuteronomy 4:39; John 8:23).

Solomon voiced his prayer not just for his own benefit but on behalf of *all the congregation of Israel*. These were especially those Israelites who were in attendance personally for the temple dedication (1 Kings 8:1–2). Their presence is important partly because they must overhear the exhortations to avoid sin and partly because God wishes to emphasize the relationship with the people of Israel. They were united with each other and God by their history, present life, and hope for a blessed future. In a sense, they are being dedicated as much as the temple when we note the blessing mentioned in 1 Kings 8:14 (compare 2 Samuel 6:18).

B. God's Uniqueness (vv. 23–24)

23. And he said, LORD God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart.

The following two verses are worded almost identically with 2 Chronicles 6:14–15. The confession emphasizes the uniqueness of God, an idea that appears in many biblical texts (examples: Psalms 115:3–8; 135:15–18). *The Lord God of Israel* brooks no rivals (Deuteronomy 4:15–20; 5:7; etc.).

One area of His uniqueness appears in keeping a *covenant* in His merciful love. This language comes from Deuteronomy 7:9, 12, and it reflects the direction of that book. While Israelites were responsible for obeying God's commandments, their relationship with God rested primarily upon His covenant promise. It was not earned by human merit.

Even so, the verse at hand emphasizes the attitude of the people. As indicated by “the Shema” (which means “hear”) in Deuteronomy 6:4–5, the people should hear and receive the Law of Moses with enthusiasm, commitment, and even rejoicing, as emphasized throughout

Deuteronomy. Mindless, routine obedience cannot be the goal of the relationship because it is not sustainable. Those who follow God without enthusiasm will stop following at a slight provocation (Matthew 13:1–9).

24. Who hast kept with thy servant David my father that thou promisedst him: thou spakest also with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thine hand, as it is this day.

The promise to *David* that his offspring would build the temple (2 Samuel 7:13), now fulfilled, is evidence of God’s faithfulness. The eventual destruction of kingship and even that of the temple did not cancel God’s plan for Israel; rather, God used those events to symbolize His presence as they pointed to greater, eternal realities regarding spiritual and heavenly kingship and temple. God may carry out His promises in various ways, but the promises always remain just that.

What Do You Think?

Which of God’s scriptural promises has He already fulfilled?

Digging Deeper

How does recalling His fulfilled promises encourage your faithfulness in waiting for the fulfillment of the rest?

II. Oppressive Circumstances

(1 Kings 8:37–39)

A. Sword, Famine, Plague (vv. 37–38)

37. If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be.

The Old Testament often summarizes the calamities that may befall God’s people in terms of “sword,” “famine,” and “pestilence” (examples: 1 Chronicles 21:11–12; Jeremiah 14:12). These three general categories speak to oppression and/or fatalities caused by human adversaries, meager harvests, and disease, respectively. *Blasting* (blight), *mildew*, *locust*, and *caterpillar* result in famine as crops are destroyed (compare Psalm 78:46; Amos 4:9; Joel 1:4). These predictions of calamities come from the greatly expanded listing in Deuteronomy 28:15–68.

What Do You Think?

What are some examples of disasters or crises modern people fear and need God’s help to withstand?

Digging Deeper

When we pray to God for help with these kinds of issues, what is our responsibility to act? Consider James 2:16.

38a. What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all the people Israel.

Solomon asks God to reply to any prayer offered by those either in the temple or mindful of it. You may notice that the word *or* is italicized in your edition of the *King James Version*. That’s how the *KJV* indicates that there is no word in the text of the Hebrew language being translated. Thus the word *or* is the translators’ best judgment for smooth reading.

On the other hand, the ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint) omits the phrase *by all the people Israel*. The prayer does envision Gentiles praying, beginning in 1 Kings 8:41. But here the focus remains on Israelites as those especially subject to the curses following a violation of the covenant (again, see Deuteronomy 28).

38b. Which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth the hands toward this house.

The phrase *the plague of his own heart* speaks to pangs of conscience (compare 1 Samuel 24:5; Romans 2:15; etc.). Each person knows his or her own troubles and can express them in prayer as *hands* are lifted *toward this house* (compare and contrast Exodus 9:29; Job 11:13; Psalm 88:9; Isaiah 1:15). This may work on two levels: (1) the suffering of the people as a whole may be expressed in different ways by different individuals, and (2) each person should be aware of his or her details and ably communicate about them to God. In other words, prayer can take many forms. On the one hand, it depends partly on forms shared by the community as a whole over time. On the other hand, it depends partly on individual experience and perception.

Turn First?

One of the many tragedies of World War II was the Bengal Famine of 1943. India at the time was still part of the British Empire and engaged in the global struggle against the Axis powers. The Japanese Empire had already conquered neighboring Burma (present-day Myanmar) and was poised to invade India. Much of the local harvest was diverted to the needs of the global military effort, leading to the starvation of at least two million people in the Bengal province.

Mahatma Gandhi, a leader in India's growing independence movement, refused to accept aid from the British government or foreign aid agencies because he believed that would compromise India's self-sufficiency. He didn't want to perpetuate a cycle of dependence on foreign powers. Instead, he urged India's population to use their own resources to help one another through the crisis. This effort was very controversial and only partially successful.

Where do you turn first for help during a crisis? Is your first impulse to cry out to governmental agencies? Is it to rely on your own resources in the pride of "rugged individualism"? Or is your first turn toward God?

—A. W.

B. Hear, Forgive, Act (v. 39)

39. Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest (for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men).

Humans do well to know their own hearts and minds as God knows them (compare Hebrews 4:12–13). That's an ideal to strive for, although it is impossible to attain since God knows us better than we know ourselves (1 Corinthians 11:28–32; 2 Corinthians 10:12). Indeed, we humans have a tendency toward self-deception (1 John 1:8). If God responds to prayer based on an assessment of need (and He does; see Matthew 6:8, 32), how much more are His responses in reaction to the direction of one's heart (13:58)!

The divine response follows a sequence that begins with an appeal for God to "hear"; this is a feature in ancient Israelite prayers (examples: Psalms 5:1; 27:7; 28:2; 54:2; 64:1; contrast

22:2; Lamentations 3:8, 44). Then God forgives, since a request for help usually accompanies self-assessment and turning away from sin. Then God acts appropriately. This sequence is relevant because the moral and spiritual ground must be cleared before action occurs.

At the same time, God does assess the *ways* of the person praying. Wicked people who defy God's call cannot utter legitimate prayers. That's because their intention is not to change their ways but to escape some immediate trial (see Proverbs 15:29; Isaiah 58:1–9; Hosea 6:1–7:16; 1 Timothy 2:8).

The verse also insists that God knows the thoughts of all people, not just Israelites. This insight leads to the expectation that Gentiles may also pray toward the temple and ask for God's help.

III. Inevitable Sin

(1 Kings 8:46, 48–50a)

A. Anger, Captivity, Exile (v. 46)

46. If they sin against thee, (for there is no man that sinneth not,) and thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captives unto the land of the enemy, far or near.

The prayer takes an important turn, assuming that the people may sin so grievously that the covenant might fail as the Israelites are removed from their promised land. This event did occur. However, the prediction goes beyond the curses for disobedience in Deuteronomy 28:15–68 to promises of prosperity in Deuteronomy 30:1–10. These envision the loss of the land as a punishment, and the return to it as an effect of God's mercy, respectively. The relationship between Israel and God was not based on human achievement but on God's love and kindness.

So the prayer ends with a request that God will renew the people even after their communal sins have resulted in the curses of Deuteronomy 28:15–68. Even the collapse of their culture ought not to be the last word. God remains just and punishes sin, but He also shows mercy.

This verse should not be read as an excuse for sin. "God knows I'm human and will forgive me," a sentence often heard in Christian circles, is a statement of extreme arrogance and careless indifference to the moral and spiritual demands of faith. It is not a statement honoring God or taking human duties or capacities seriously. It distorts Solomon's point here. The prayer does not ask for cheap grace because it accepts the reality of punishment for sin.

What Do You Think?

Is it possible to know that a hardship is God's judgment in your life? Explain your answer with biblical evidence.

Digging Deeper

What danger does assuming another person's hardship is God's judgment pose to presenting the gospel?

B. Hear, Sustain, Forgive (vv. 48–50a)

48. And so return unto thee with all their heart and with all their soul, in the land of their enemies, which led them away captive, and pray unto thee toward their land, which thou

gavest unto their fathers, the city which thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for thy name.

This part of Solomon's prayer assumes that suffering will cause people to reflect on their lives and amend them. It also assumes that God will hear their prayers of repentance when uttered in a land of exile. This means, in turn, that God's presence is universal and that He is interested in the prayers of people seeking change and redemption.

The verse also reveals the idea of praying toward the temple in Jerusalem. It may be the earliest evidence for that practice. Much later, Daniel prayed, facing Jerusalem while in Babylon (Daniel 6:10). This practice shows how posture indicates the direction of the heart. A good (and bad) example of this is Ezekiel 8:16, which describes "about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east."

What Do You Think?

What does it look like to turn back to God with all your heart and soul?

Digging Deeper

Who do you trust to help you identify when you need to repent and return to the Lord?

49. Then hear thou their prayer and their supplication in heaven thy dwelling place, and maintain their cause.

It's one thing to *hear*, but another thing to *heed* (see the distinction in Ezekiel 33:4–5). We see both elements in this prayer, with the request to *maintain their cause* as the heeding part. The "cause" has been given to the Israelites by God; it is the very reason for the existence of their nation (Deuteronomy 7:6). Thus, the prayer ultimately is that God's will be done as the nation of Israel fulfills its divine purpose. And God is certainly interested in having His will done!

50a. And forgive thy people that have sinned against thee, and all their transgressions wherein they have transgressed against thee.

God takes no pleasure in our suffering, even when we have earned it (Ezekiel 18:32; 33:11). Spiritual reform sometimes results in suffering, since we need to eliminate certain attitudes and behaviors. But even the suffering draws the compassion of God and of righteous people. We hasten to add that neither this verse nor any other Bible text implies that all suffering is deserved. Much is not (compare Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–3).

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

The collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa in the early 1990s could easily have resulted in revenge-filled ethnic warfare. We need to look no further than the Rwandan genocide of 1994 to see a brutal outcome to such a war. Yet this did not happen, in large part due to the work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996.

Chaired by Desmond Tutu, the commission made a point to listen to the stories of victims and perpetrators alike. Both groups were encouraged to work through a process of forgiveness and reconciliation.

We should want both of those two things not only from others but also from God. Forgiveness and reconciliation involving one will often be inseparable from forgiveness and reconciliation involving the other. Which of these five passages convict you the most in that regard: Matthew 5:23–24; 6:14–15; 25:45; 1 Corinthians 8:12; and Colossians 3:13? Why?

What Do You Think?

What gives you confidence that God has forgiven your sins?

Digging Deeper

How do you offer the gift of forgiveness to others?

Conclusion

A. People as Sinners

One of the most puzzling features of prayer in the Bible occurs in this prayer at the dedication of the temple. Here, Solomon voiced the nation's prayer for forgiveness as part of its ongoing life together. In this case, Solomon prayed for forgiveness of sins that had not yet been committed!

In that regard, the prayer serves as a reflection on the entire history of Israel, from the time of the exodus of 1447 BC (481 years in the past as Solomon uttered this prayer) to Nebuchadnezzar's forced removal of the citizens of Judah in 586 BC (380 years after the prayer). For us to understand the prayer, we must place it within this larger context, the story of Israel in the promised land, covering the entire books of Joshua through 2 Kings. Both that history and Solomon's prayer reflect a realistic assessment of the human condition and the tendency of human beings to fail. The Bible does not try to pretend that a perfect, sinless time existed at some point after the Garden of Eden. Idolatry and oppression occurred regularly; they still do. Solomon's prayer foreshadowed the outcome found in 2 Kings 25. Even so, Israel's story, as recorded in the books of Joshua through 2 Kings, is not an obituary but a warning and an invitation to a better life.

B. God as Defender

Solomon's prayer rests on the assumption that God seeks to heal and forgive, even when (or especially when) sins threaten to overcome the sinners. God defends penitent people from those who would oppress them—and even from themselves. The worship by Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church celebrates the expansive nature of God's mercy. We are thereby reminded to beware of the traps that require it.

The prayer in 1 Kings 8 is, therefore, realistic but also hopeful. The dedication of the holiest spot on earth (at the time) was connected to the reality of unholiness. Solomon cast the nation of Israel as a whole on the mercy of God. In so doing, Solomon sought God's commitment to continue working with the people continuously as part of their centuries-long process of learning and obeying.

Today, the church would do well to recover the biblical practice of confession of sins, both of individuals and of the church as a whole. Part of that recovery would involve acknowledgment that the temptations to harm others or dishonor God do not go away. We will need forgiveness in the future, and we need humility in the present. Solomon's prayer shows us a way forward.

C. Prayer

God of mercy, Lord of love, hear the cries of all who need You. Even when our sins have trapped us in suffering, show us mercy. Do not let us be overwhelmed by our bad decisions or those of others. As Jesus called even those who betrayed Him to feed His sheep, call us into Your eternal kingdom. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Sin is real, but so is God's mercy.