

1 Kings 8:27

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Date: 09 December 2007

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[0 : 00] I would like you now to turn back to the passage we read from the first book of Kings, chapter 8, and to look particularly at verse 27.

But will God really dwell on earth? Will God really dwell on earth?

Will God really dwell on earth?

God is dead in the Western world. Last month they published a supplement devoted to religion. The title of the supplement was In God's Name, in which they highlighted the popularity of religion, and how that is increasing around the world, and how they had to change their mind, having previously assumed that God was dead.

[1 : 34] They now come to realize that God, at least belief in God, is very active. But of course, as belief in God grows, so also does the reaction of atheism.

All of us are aware of Richard Dawkins, and several other atheists who were very strident in their opposition to God. Just this last week, the children's film The Golden Compass came out, portraying the first of Philip Pullman's dark materials trilogy.

Philip Pullman wrote these books as a card-carrying, propagandist atheist. He said, Now, probably because of the significant presence of Christians in the American population, the atheism of the books has been very much toned down, I understand, in the films.

But nevertheless, I think we are aware of the fact that we have this resurgence of atheism. Still very much a minority.

The Economist reckons that at a maximum there are about 500 million atheists in the world, but no more. And they focus on the resurgence of belief in God.

[3 : 10] A French journalist foresaw this coming. He published a book at the beginning of the 90s, a man called Gilles Keppel. A book which, the title of which was The Revenge of God, in which he had already discerned signs of a reaction against an over-emphasis on enlightenment or rationalistic thinking, not only in the Western world, but particularly in the Islamic world.

And of course, there has been a resurgence of fundamentalism in Islam and in Hinduism and in Buddhism as well. The concept of God is a very important one.

And it's one that I think we need to think about and we need to reflect on perhaps more often than we do. The concept, the Christian concept of God, the biblical concept of God, is of someone who is infinitely more powerful, more pure, more knowledgeable than we are.

And when we come to worship God, we ought to come with a sense of awe, a sense of reverence, a sense of otherness.

The writer to the Hebrews says that anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

[4 : 40] So we've come together today to worship God. And God has promised to be present among his people. And it's so easy for us, when we come to church, to come to the building.

Or we come because of habit. We come out of routine. And we forget that the whole purpose of our coming is to meet with God.

So that God might reveal himself to us. God is present. That's his promise. But are we aware of that presence? God's presence is a spiritual presence.

It's not a tangible presence. It's a spiritual presence. And so we need to be spiritually attuned to it. If we're going to become aware of the presence of God.

But at the same time, Paul, writing to the Corinthians, said, if an outsider comes into your meeting, that person should be aware that God is among you. And so though God's presence is spiritual, nevertheless, it is something that can be sensed.

[5 : 48] God's presence is something that ought to be felt when the people of God meet together. The question that Solomon asked was, how could such a great God dwell on earth?

The picture that Solomon presents to us of God is of a supreme being in every sense of the term. O Lord God of Israel, he said, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath.

And then he goes on to ask the question of our text. Will God really dwell on earth? Now Solomon asked this question not because of out of doubt, but he asked it out of amazement.

He was amazed by the fact that God's presence was manifested on the occasion of the dedication of the temple in the presence of the cloud.

We read in verse 11, when the priest withdrew from the holy place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priest could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple.

[7 : 02] Now Solomon tells us that he immediately knew what this meant. We see that he says in verse 12, the Lord has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud.

He knew his history. He knew the background of the people of God. He knew that ever since his people had been brought out of Egypt under Moses, they were led across the desert by a massive cloud as a visible symbol of the presence of God.

And that pillar went before them day and night. It was a single pillar with a fiery core enveloped by clouds. In daylight, the cloud's brightness appeared less intense by the shining of the sun.

But in the darkness, the inner radiance of the fire shone through. So it was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And this symbolism of the cloud continues and is intensified at Sinai.

When God met with Moses on the summit of the mountain and received the law of God, received the Ten Commandments. And again, when he went up on the mountain and received the instructions for the building of the tabernacle, we read in Exodus chapter 24, when Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.

[8 : 27] For six days the cloud covered the mountain and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. And so we see the cloud that symbolized the presence of God settled on the mountain.

And the word settled there is a word which the rabbis in much later, much nearer our Christian era, they took from that word, the Hebrew for that word, the word Shekinah, which is really settled, to symbolize the cloud of God's glory.

And Christian theologians also speak about the Shekinah, the glory of the Lord. Originally it was in the cloud. And we see this manifested very visibly in the dedication of the temple.

But then again, when the tabernacle was set up, Solomon would have recalled, when the tabernacle was set up, when Moses came down from the mountain, the tabernacle was built.

We read that 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.

[9 : 46] So we see the cloud moving from Sinai to the tabernacle and continuing to rest upon the tabernacle as the people fulfilled their journey to the land of Canaan.

Solomon knew his history. He knew the past traditions of his people. He realized the significance of the cloud. It was the symbol of the Lord's presence.

And Solomon, of course, tells us that the Lord dwells in a dark cloud. The cloud not only signifies the presence of God, but in a sense hides God, obscures God.

God is present, and yet God is inscrutable. He is with us. The sign of his presence is with us, but he is also beyond us.

He is present, but he is also inscrutable. Now, God's presence today does not come in the form of a cloud. It's not symbolized by a cloud because God's presence today is mediated through the Holy Spirit.

[10 : 56] And the Shekinah of the Old Testament was a type, if you like, of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit rested upon the church in the day of Pentecost.

It rested as tongues of fire. And God's Spirit was then given to the church and has remained with the church. And God's Spirit is with us today, and that it is through the Spirit of God that God mediates his presence to us.

And that's why it's so important for us to recognize that our rapport, if you like, with God is a spiritual rapport. It's not something visible, not something tangible.

It's a spiritual rapport. And that's why we need to be in the Spirit in order to sense the presence of God among us.

So, although God is present, yet the cloud, the symbolism of the cloud, reminds us that there is much about him that we cannot understand. God cannot be put in a test tube.

[12:02] God cannot be put under a microscope. God cannot be put in a box. God is beyond us. One theologian has said that we can apprehend God, but we cannot comprehend him.

And perhaps that's a helpful way of putting it. We can apprehend him, we can know him, but we can never fully understand him. We can never write an essay about God and get a hundred percent or get a full mark.

Because God is infinitely greater than our highest thoughts about him. So, God is imminent. He is with us, but he is also transcendent.

He is beyond us. He is a God who draws near to us and yet a God who is infinitely higher and greater than we are.

This God, the God of Solomon and our God, the God and Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is a God who from the very beginning communicates himself with his people not through images.

[13:09] It's not a tangible, visible presence. But he communicates through his voice. He communicates through his word. The focus in here is on, although there is the cloud.

The cloud is symbolizing the presence of God. God spoke to the people through his word. And that's why the symbolism of the table of the tables of the law within the Holy of Holies, the ten words written in ordinary language, written in language that people could understand.

God speaks to us in our own language. It's very important for us to recognize that. That God comes to us through the word. He communicates himself through his word.

And he speaks to us in our language. He does not communicate himself through a visual means.

He communicates himself through hearing rather than through sight.

And so, along with the obscurity or inscrutability rather of the presence of God, we have the clarity of God's words.

[14:24] That God's words are absolutely clear. God's words are written in the language of the people. There's nothing obscure or esoteric about them. The cloud, there's an element of mystery and of inscrutability.

That the word is clear. And God wants us to respond to him through his word. Solomon was aware as we've seen that God is in heaven and that even the heavens cannot contain his presence.

And to underline the fact that God's presence is not contained in the temple, the focus here is frequently on God's name which in the NIV is translated with a capital N.

I think to help us to understand the significance of it. We have it in verse 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20. And so what Solomon is saying is that God is present in the temple but he's not physically present in the temple.

His name is there but God is really dwelling in the heavens. But God's name is here. And the word name in the Bible especially in the Old Testament means the essence of a person's character.

[15:42] People were given a name in the Old Testament not because their father or their mother or their grandparent or somebody had that name. They were given that name because the name would represent the prayer of the parents.

This was the prayer of the parents' prayer of what that child might become. And if the child did not fulfill that desire, that prayer of the parents then the name would be changed and was often changed.

So the names in the Bible, names especially in the Old Testament are like nicknames today. A nickname describes a person's character. It doesn't tell us who his father or mother are.

It tells us who that person is. And that's I think the significance of the word name here. That God's character is God's God reveals himself as through his attributes through who he is as he does so in his word.

So the Lord's name is the essence of his character. And the interesting thing is that the Old Testament speaks about God proclaiming his name to us.

[16:56] And that's how God communicates through his word. He proclaims his name. He communicates his character. That's how we discover the attributes of God.

The features of God. He proclaims his name to us. He doesn't show us a picture. A visible picture. He doesn't give us an image. He gives us a proclamation. He gives us his word. Remember how when Moses was on Mount Sinai he asked the Lord to show him his glory. And the Lord said I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my name the Lord in your presence. I will have mercy in whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion in whom I will have compassion. But he said you cannot see my face for no one can see me and live. The Lord proclaims his name the Lord and the word Lord there is the Lord in capitals which translates the Hebrew word Yahweh which is the covenant name for God. [18:02] The word God is like the word Allah the word Elohim in Hebrew. It's the generic name. It was found all over the ancient Near East.

It was the word for God that many religions use. But Yahweh the word translated L-O-R-D in capitals in our Bibles was unique to Israel. This was the Lord the covenant God. This was the God who revealed himself and taken his people out of Egypt. And this is the name that he proclaims to Moses. And the proclamation is that his name is that he will have mercy in whom he will have mercy in whom he will have compassion. And so this focus on the name of God is on his compassion and on his mercy. Then we read in Exodus chapter 34 that the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with Moses and proclaimed his name the Lord. He passed in front of Moses proclaiming the Lord the Lord the compassionate and gracious God slow to anger abounding in love and faithfulness maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness rebellion and sin. [19:18] A God of mercy a God of grace. But he goes on yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished he punishes the children and their children for sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

So God is presented to us as a God of justice but above all a God of mercy and what the focus here is much stronger on his mercy than on his wrath. And so God's name God is essentially a God of love and a God of mercy. He is also a God of judgment and a God of wrath. That's God's strange work. The essence of God's name is that he is a God of mercy and that's what gives us hope because all of us are sinners all of us are failures we belong to a fallen creation and are part of a fallen race. But God reveals himself to us he proclaims his name to us and tells us that he's a God of mercy. He's abounding in compassion. He's abounding in mercy and in love. So this is the God that we worship today. God is God is present among his people. [20:32] God is present among his people. God is present among his people. We may not be aware of it, sufficiently aware of it.

We may not be spiritually attuned to it, but God is present. There are many, many radio signals, for example, passing through the air in this building today. But we're unaware of them because we don't have a receiver. And so often we need to have a spiritual receiver to hear what God is saying to us and to sense his presence. We need to be attuned. We need to be in the spirit. And that's why it's so important for us to prepare to worship God, that we might be spiritually attuned to him and to what he is saying to us. God is present among his people. He can be apprehended and his presence can be sensed. And this is noticeably so in the case of revivals in the church. [21:36] If you read the history of revivals, sometimes whole communities become aware of an intangible sense of the presence of God. People become aware of the eternal dimension in a unique way.

And there's a sense in which, although we cannot expect to live our entire lives in a revival, yet there is a sense in which we ought to sense the presence of God. I think Paul makes that clear. Even a stranger ought to be aware of the presence of God. And sometimes, and very often in the history of revivals, when strangers would come into a church or into a meeting in the open air when meetings were held, and God was at work, they would be convicted and they would become aware that God was present. Perhaps people were totally unaware of God's presence previously. So I think that's the first lesson. God is present with his people. That's his promise. And he can be known, he can be apprehended.

And our privilege is to apprehend him. Our privilege is to know him. our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him.

[22 : 53] To enjoy him, to know him, to rejoice in him. I think the second lesson that we take away from this passage is what we might call the otherness of God. God is other than us.

He's beyond us. He's with us, but he's also beyond us. He's revealed himself to us, and yet he is inscrutable. There's an element of mystery that we cannot fathom. There's some sense in which we cannot begin to fathom it.

God is holy. Many scholars of the Old Testament maintain that the word holy essentially means different, separate.

God is of a different essence to us. God is in heaven, we are upon the earth. God is God, we are his creatures.

God is infinite. God is eternal. God is unchangeable in his being. God is the source of wisdom, of all holiness, of all justice, of all goodness, of all truth.

[24 : 02] We may not be able to see God's face, but we can hear his voice. God comes to us in his mercy and in his grace, but he always comes to us as a God who is other.

A God who is something else. You know, we sometimes use the phrase of somebody who may be unique, he is something else, or she is something else. Well, God is something else in capitals. God is different, God is unique, God is supreme, God is all-powerful, God is majestic, God is the one before whom we ought to be filled with awe, a sense of his majesty, a sense of his greatness, a sense of his holiness.

And our rightful place before God is to be prostrate on our faces before him, to acknowledge that he is indeed God. The third lesson I think we can take away from here is the voice of God.

God speaks, God's presence is mediated as he proclaims his name to us. God is not visible, but he is audible. And we who belong to the church of God belong to an acoustic community.

The essence of our worship is hearing. It is through hearing that we come to faith. It is through hearing that we worship God.

[25 : 26] Of course, that hearing must be followed by doing. The Bible makes that absolutely clear. Our service in worship must be followed by service in the world. That is absolutely clear, but the essence of worship is hearing.

God is an audible God. The tables of the law in the language of the people are there in the center of the tabernacle, right in the heart of the symbol of God's presence, are these tables of the law written in legible, intelligible Hebrew.

And so God's word comes to us today in our own language. What does he tell us? He tells us that he is compassionate. He tells us that he is gracious, that he is slow to anger, that he is abounding in love and in faithfulness.

He also tells us that he is a God of justice, that he tells us that he has given his son to fulfill the demands of that justice on our behalf on the cross of Calvary. He tells us that he so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.

God proclaims his name, and it is as he proclaims his name to us that the church grows and the church is built. And God proclaims his name not simply through the reading of scripture and through the formal preaching, but he proclaims his name through the witness of his people.

[26 : 56] And all of us have the privilege of proclaiming God's name to others, to tell people who God is. We have an opportunity today. God is news in the world. We see that in the film, this film which is being shown at the moment.

A great talking point. The Church of Scotland has produced a discussion document. I haven't seen it, but David Robertson has been involved in the production of it, and he tells me that the January and the monthly record will carry a feature on this.

Now, these films like this, the Dawkins books give us an opportunity when we're talking to others to proclaim the name of God, to tell others who God is. We have this great privilege of telling others who God is.

You remember what Jesus said to his disciples, who do you say I am? Who do you tell other people I am? And when Peter said, we tell them that you're the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus said, upon this rock I will build my church.

And it is as we confess him, as we proclaim his name to others that the church will be built. There are many people who will never enter a church, but who need to hear the gospel.

[28 : 15] And they won't hear the gospel humanly speaking unless we take it to them. You and I have the privilege and the responsibility of proclaiming God's name to others.

And the promise is that as we proclaim his name, he will speak to people. They will hear his voice. He will awaken them from the dead. He will bring them to new life.

We need to trust the gospel. It is the power of God. It simply needs to be let loose. It needs to be let out in order that we might see God at work in our day and in our generation.

And so this ancient story of the dedication of the tabernacle when the ark was brought in and Solomon went on to pray his great prayer reminds us of the presence of God with his people. It also reminds us through the cloud especially of the otherness of God, the inscrutability of God, the holiness of God. the presence of God, the otherness of God and finally it speaks about the voice of God.

[29 : 30] God speaks. He speaks through his word and our privilege is a privilege not only to hear God speak to us but also to be the vehicles of his voice to others.

And I pray that all of us today may hear his voice and respond to his voice and commit ourselves to him that we may indeed glorify him and begin to enjoy him for now and forever if we haven't done so until now.

That we may not only hear his voice but that we may become the vehicles of his voice. That we may become media through which God will speak to the world.

What a privilege. What a responsibility. Let us pray. God heavenly father we come before you at the close of this service to give you thanks for the way in which you revealed yourself to Solomon and to the people of Israel on that occasion so many centuries ago.

We bless and we praise you that you reveal yourself even more intimately today and even more powerfully. Help us to believe that Lord and help us to see in our day and generation signs of you being at work.

[30 : 50] We come to thank you for the assurance that you are present. We thank you for the assurance that you are who you say you are. You are the all-powerful God. That you are the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Help us O Lord really to trust you as such and to be willing to proclaim your name to others and to see your kingdom come not that we can make it come but we thank you that it is as we tell others about you that you make it come.

Help us O Lord to be faithful proclaimers of your name. We ask this for Jesus' sake. Amen.