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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Worship at Ground Zero

1 Kings 8

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series: The Wisest Fool: Lessons From the Life of Solomon

In his book, *Letters to My Children*, Daniel Taylor responds to some questions from his young children. At one point his son Matthew asks, "Church is getting boring. Why do we have to go to church?" Here's part of Taylor's reply:

*Think about it. If a friend called and said a famous athlete or singer was going to be at his house, and asked if you wanted to come over, wouldn't you go? Wouldn't you be excited? Of course! So would I.*

*Well, church is the place where God will be, every time you go. Of course he's with you whether you're in church or not, but he can be there in a special way when many believers gather to celebrate him together.*

*"Sounds great," I hear you say, "but then how come you fell asleep so much? If God is really there, I mean really there, then how come we aren't bug-eyed and breathless most all the time?"*

*That's a very good question. I wish I had a good answer. Part of it is that God knows we can't take very much of him. It's like when you hold Fluffs, our hamster. If you squeezed very hard, Fluffs would be on his way to hamster heaven. You have to hold him gently, talk to him quietly. Well, God has to be sort of like that with us.*

*Truthfully, though, the biggest reason might be that we don't want very much of God. We want God to stay in his cage like Fluffs does. We're afraid of losing control of our own lives. We just want him to help us a little here, and forgive us a little there, and let us handle the rest. So we try to make church a safe place where we can get a little of God but not too much.*

*We don't like surprises, not even from God, so we make our churches places where surprises aren't likely to happen. We ask God to come, but only if he will be polite. And therefore, little kids and adult kids often fall asleep—even if they keep their eyes open.*

*And yet, at the very same time, church is a wonderful place. God has chosen it, "sorry-ness" and all, to be the place where he will meet his people, the place from which he will send his people to all parts of the world to preach the good news about him.*

What Taylor is really talking about is worship. We come to church to worship God. Whenever we gather with other believers that's our main purpose. It's not the only time or place we worship, but it is a special place and time. Yet sometimes worship isn't all it's cracked up to be.

That wasn't the case on the day King Solomon dedicated the new Temple in Jerusalem. This was a day he and his people had been looking forward to for a long time. The Temple had been under construction for over seven years. It had required a massive amount of natural resources and human labor. Finally, it was finished and could begin to function as the place of worship. But first there'd need to be a proper dedication. After all the planning and all the work, it would be rather anti-climactic to not have a party!

But this was more than just a party. It was an unforgettable worship experience. God surprised everyone and showed up! That's why I've called this "Worship at Ground Zero." Ground Zero

describes a place on the earth's surface that's closest to detonation. This was more like an explosion of worship. The people may not have known what to expect when they showed up that day, but they left bug-eyed and breathless.

It all started on a Fall day that coincided with the Feast of Tabernacles, when Israel traditionally celebrated the end of the harvest and recalled how God provided for them when they lived in tents in the wilderness after the Exodus.

The first order of business was to bring the ark of the covenant into the Temple. Solomon gathers all the elders of Israel. These were the men who provided spiritual leadership for the people. He also summons the heads of the various tribes and families. The priests and Levites were also there. Solomon himself led the whole thing. Look what happens.

**Then King Solomon summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the Lord's covenant from Zion, the City of David. All the Israelites came together to King Solomon at the time of the festival in the month of Ethanim, the seventh month. When all the elders of Israel had arrived, the priests took up the ark, and they brought up the ark of the Lord and the tent of meeting and all the sacred furnishings in it. The priests and Levites carried them up, and King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted. The priests then brought the ark of the Lord's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and overshadowed the ark and its carrying poles. These poles were so long that their ends could be seen from the Holy Place in front of the inner sanctuary, but not from outside the Holy Place; and they are still there today. There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt (1 Kings 8:1–9).**

### **True Worship Utilizes Leadership**

The ark was a sacred box representing the very presence of God. It was called the ark of the covenant because inside of it were the two stone tablets that Moses put there. On them God had written the terms of the covenant—the Ten Commandments as a reminder of God's love and their obligation to obey.

It was very important that all this be done right. That's why the proper leadership was required. I'm sure they'd not forgotten what happened to King David. For many years the tabernacle and ark were in Shiloh, and then Gibeon. But David wanted to bring it to Jerusalem, so he organized a huge procession to bring it there by oxcart. But on the way, one of the oxen stumbled and a man named Uzzah carelessly reached out to steady the ark. You weren't supposed to do that, and he was instantly killed. David felt responsible. He was a little angry at God. Instead of bringing the ark into Jerusalem, he left it at the house of a man named Obed-Edom.

So you can see it's very important all of this be done right and that required leadership. It's true today as well. Worship requires leadership. I think about the elders and pastors of this church. The first responsibility we have is to be worshippers of God ourselves, and then to lead you in that same worship. As we worship God, both privately and publicly, we inspire others to worship him. When people see leaders captivated by the majesty of God, they're drawn to join in and taught how to do so. That's also true in the life of a family. Here the heads of families are playing an important role. As a result, these families came together—fathers, mothers, children, teenagers and grandparents. If you're a father, this relates to you. You're called to lead your family in prayer and worship. At the end of your life, you want to leave your kids a legacy of worship.

### **True Worship Requires Sacrifice**

Notice also what they did as they brought the ark to the Temple: they offered sacrifices. This reminds me again of David. Three months after leaving the ark at Obed-Edom's house, David finally went and retrieved the ark and brought it to Jerusalem, but this time he was more cautious. They sacrificed an ox every six steps (2 Sam 6:13)! Imagine how long it would take just to walk a few hundred yards if every six steps you had to stop, put the ark down, and then sacrifice an entire cow! But Solomon did even more; he made more than anyone could count.

These sacrifices were mainly precautionary as an atonement for sin. These people had a sense they were in the presence of a holy God. Everything about this scene communicates that. The ark was put in the Most Holy place. That chamber, called the Holy of Holies, was made in the shape of a perfect cube and covered with pure gold. This was the throne room of God; an earthly copy of the place where God rules in heaven (Heb. 9:24). And when the ark was brought into that chamber it had to be carried on poles because no one could touch it and live. Those poles add to the sense of holiness and mystery. The priests who served at the Temple couldn't see the ark but they could see the poles sticking out on each side. The ark would also be set beneath the wings of the cherubim. These were a replica of the holy angels who constantly worship God in heaven, bearing witness to a holy God. The psalmist says *"God sits enthroned upon the cherubim."* They cry, *"Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!"* (Ps. 99:1, 5).

So these people knew in order to stand in the presence of a holy God, they needed an atonement for sin; that's what the sacrifices

were all about. Actually, once a year there was one very important sacrifice made on the Day of Atonement. The high priest would sacrifice one animal and take the blood into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle it on the Mercy Seat, which covered the ark. This one sacrifice made each year would atone for all the sins of God's people.

All of this was meant to prepare for a future Savior. The prophet Isaiah said one day a Savior would come and make a perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sin. He wrote, *"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed"* (Is 53:5). When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he cried out, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Once Jesus made that sacrifice, no further sacrifice was needed.

But worship still demands sacrifice. We still serve a holy God. He's not to be trifled with. But today, instead of offering animals, we offer up our own lives. Rom 12:1 says, *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."* You see, worship doesn't start in here when we sing songs; it starts out there as we offer up all that we are to God, not because we're afraid of him, but because of his tender mercies. With that, we offer up sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise. And just like we see here, they should be more numerous than anyone can count!

### **True Worship Invokes Awe**

**When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple. Then Solomon said, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud;" (verses 10–12).**

No one could have guessed what would happen next. Daniel Taylor said to his son, "We don't like surprises, not even from God." Well, here's a surprise. Once the priests left the Holy Place, the glory of the Lord filled the Temple. It came in the form of a cloud; the same glory cloud that guided Israel through the wilderness. It was the symbol of God's presence. It both revealed God's presence and concealed God's glory. There's a certain mystery about God; there's much we can't see and much we don't know. No one can see God in the full blaze of his glory and live. Even here, the priests are so blown away they can't perform their service! I find this funny! God shows up and the ministers are dumbfounded, paralyzed by his presence. They were fine as long as God was way up there, but as soon as he showed up they don't know what to do. They'd been playing with the idea of God for so long they were stunned when the real thing showed up! Solomon tries to bring some perspective and reminds them God said he'd show up in a dark cloud. That's why we built the temple for him to dwell in.

When God shows up in our worship, there's a sense of fear and a sense of safety. John Piper says it's like you're exploring an unknown glacier in the dead of winter. Just as you reach a

sheer cliff with a great view of miles of jagged ice and mountains of snow, a terrible storm breaks in. The wind is so strong fear rises in your heart it might blow you off the cliff. But in the midst of the storm you find a cleft in the ice where you can hide. Here you feel secure, but still the awesome might of the storm rages on, and you watch it with a kind of trembling pleasure. Not everything we call fear vanishes from your heart, only the life-threatening part. There remains the trembling, the awe, the wonder, the feeling that you'd never want to tangle with such a storm or be the adversary of such a power. Piper says, "And so it is with God. The fear of God is what is left of the storm when you have a safe place to watch right in the middle of it. Hope turns fear into a trembling and peaceful wonder; and fear takes everything trivial out of hope and makes it earnest and profound. The terrors of God make the pleasures of his people intense. The fireside fellowship is all the sweeter when the storm is howling outside the cottage."

Years later, the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of God leaving the Temple (Ez. 8:1-4). Indeed the Temple itself would be torn down and the people taken into exile. But after a few hundred years the glory returned. It returned in the person of Jesus. John said, "*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (Jn. 1:14). Notice it says he *dwelt* among us. That word "dwell" means *tabernacle*. He tabernacled among us. It also says, "we saw his glory." This is the same glory that filled the Temple in Solomon's day. Only now the Temple is the physical body of Jesus. He's the manifestation of the glory of God dwelling among us.

Remember what happened when he took Peter, James and John up a high mountain? It says, "*There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.*" Moses and Elijah appear and they're talking with him, and Peter says, "Lord, this is great. How about we build three tabernacles; one for each of you." That makes sense. Peter knew his Old Testament. If you're going to have the glory of the lord, you'd better have a tabernacle! Then it says, "*While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'*" (Matt. 17:1-8). There's that cloud again! But there's no need for a tabernacle or Temple. Why? Because he is the tabernacle. He is the Temple. We worship him with a trembling and peaceful wonder.

### **True Worship Trusts in God's Promises**

Starting in v. 14 we see Solomon's prayer of dedication. It's the longest recorded prayer in all the Bible. Maybe you know someone like this. They say "Let's pray" and you want to run in the other direction because you know when he starts praying it may be another hour until he says "Amen." But Solomon's prayer fits because this was a big deal and in it he teaches us a few things about worship.

The first part of the prayer is in verses 14–21. He stands before the whole assembly of Israel and blesses them. In v. 14 he praises God "*who with his own hand has fulfilled what he promised*

*with his own mouth to my father David.*" Down in v. 20 he says, "*The Lord has kept the promise he made.*" The first part of the prayer is steeped in a recognition that God makes promises to his people and keeps them. Because he's a promise-keeping God we have every reason to trust him for the future. Look how he spells this out in verses 24–26.

**You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today. "Now Lord, the God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your descendants are careful in all they do to walk before me faithfully as you have done.' And now, God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father come true.**

The fact he's fulfilled his promises today means we can trust him to fulfill them in the future. And that fuels our worship with praise.

The Apostle Peter wrote about his "*very great and precious promises*" (2 Pt 1:4). Think of all the promises we have. How about John 1:12, "*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*" Do you trust in the name of Jesus? Do you believe he's the Savior of the world? Then you're his child. How about Hebrews 13:5 where God says, "*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.*" What a precious promise that is.

In the classic allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan writes of a man named Christian and his friend Hopeful on their way to the Celestial City. They encounter all kinds of trials and temptations and on one occasion find themselves locked in a dungeon in a place called Doubting Castle that's guarded by a Giant named Despair. Bunyan writes in old English, "Now a little before it was day, good Christian, as one half amazed, brake out in passionate speech: 'What a fool am I, thus to lie in a stinking Dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty. I have a Key in my bosom called Promise, that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle.' Then said Hopeful, 'That's good news; good Brother pluck it out of thy bosom and try.' Then Christian pulled it out of his bosom, and began to try at the door, whose bolt (as he turned the Key) gave back, and the door flew open with ease, and Christian and Hopeful both came out."

You see, the key to whatever it is in our life that brings doubt and despair are the promises of God.

### **True Worship Confesses Sin**

As you get into the meat of Solomon's prayer you see the bulk of the prayer has Solomon asking God to "*hear from heaven*" whenever his people turn towards the Temple and cry out to him. Solomon knows the Temple doesn't contain God; God doesn't hear from this Temple; he hears from heaven. But he says the Temple is the place where he's chosen for his Name to dwell. He says in v. 29, "*May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,'*

*so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place."*

He goes on in the prayer and envisions several scenarios where his people would need to do this: when they experience military defeat; when they suffer through natural calamities; even when they're taken into captivity. All of these things would happen to them as a result of their disobedience to God. So in turning to God they were in fact also confessing and repenting of their sin and seeking his forgiveness. Look at verses 46–51.

**"When they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you become angry with them and give them over to their enemies, who take them captive to their own lands, far away or near; and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors and say, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly'; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their ancestors, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you, and cause their captors to show them mercy; for they are your people and your inheritance, whom you brought out of Egypt, out of that iron-smelting furnace."**

Confession and repentance are an important part of our worship. Think of the people of Israel years later being in exile, reading this and hearing it as an invitation to confess their sins and experience forgiveness and healing. He even talks about non-Israelites who would hear about the Temple and come to find forgiveness. Maybe that's you. Maybe you feel a million miles away from God. Maybe you feel you've done so much wrong that you don't belong here. This prayer is an invitation for you to turn towards not a building but a person. Jesus said, **"Something greater than the Temple is here."** He was talking about himself. We look to him for forgiveness. The Bible says, **"If we confess our sins, he's faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"** (1 Jn. 1:9).

Confession also involves repentance; a desire to change. I heard of a family who attended a service where people were asked to write their sins on a piece of paper, fold the paper, and pin it onto a cross as a reminder of Christ's forgiveness. They came to the service and explained to their 6-year-old son how this worked. So when they all grabbed a sheet of paper and started

writing their confessions, he did the same. Remember, he's 6, so he wrote with big block letters. The rest of his family wrote their sins and folded the sheets so no one could see what they'd written down. Of course, they left their names off the paper as well. Then they walked to the cross and pinned their "sins" on the cross. This 6-year-old wrote, "God, I'm sorry because I lie." But then he signed his name and refused to fold it. He walked to the front and pinned it to the cross. His parents asked, "Why did you put your name on it? Don't you want to fold it up so no one can see?" He said, "I did that because I want everyone to see it. Because if they know it was me, maybe they can help me stop."

Confession and repentance go hand in hand. And sometimes we need help in that. You don't have to write your sins down for all to see in order to be forgiven, but if you really want to change, it helps to have a few people who can help you stop.

### **True Worship Brings Joy**

At the end of the prayer it says the people of Israel celebrated for 14 days. Then it says:

**On the following day he sent the people away. They blessed the king and then went home, joyful and glad in heart for all the good things the Lord had done for his servant David and his people Israel (v. 66).**

You see, this is part of worship too. There's joy and celebration. Twice in this passage it says Solomon blessed the people, but here I love how it says **they** blessed **him**! It's like everyone is so filled with joy they can't help but bless each other.

G.K. Chesterton saw the final proof of Christianity as it fulfilling our instinct for joy. He said unbelievers are forced to find their joy in the small things of this earth while the closer they get to the ultimate issues of our existence, the sadder they become. He said, "The mass of men have been forced to be gay about the small things, but sad about the big ones." In contrast to that, Christianity proves true because while life's blows make us sad, when we look at ultimate issues, we find a sovereign God who loves us. Chesterton concludes by saying, "Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian." Regardless of what hardships we face in life, there ought to be some serious joy when we gather together.

How's your worship these days? Is this a place of detonation or detachment? Are you bug-eyed and breathless or bored? Are you leading the way in your family or whatever ministry God has called you to? Are you offering up your own self to God as a sacrifice of thanksgiving? Are you banking on God's promises, letting his faithfulness fuel your praise? Are you turning to him in confession and repentance? Is your worship filled with joy?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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