

August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021

## 1 Kings 8 “Whose House Is This Anyway?”

Last week we were introduced to King David’s son, Solomon the Wise, who became the successor to Israel’s throne. We learned that “wise” is a relative term that depends on a person’s intent. This week we’re moving on to the construction of the temple that David started, and Solomon finished. Now, when I say Solomon “finished” it, I mean Solomon pulled his armies together to gather up forced labor in order to build the temple. Which is odd because the Law of Moses clearly *forbids* using forced labor because of everything that happened to the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt. But Solomon used slaves anyway and justified it by saying, “Oh come on, it’s not like I’m using Israelites. I’m using the indigenous population here, so give me a break.” So, does he believe that God frowns on Israel being slaves, but somehow blesses the use of non-Israeli slave labor? Hey, if they’re building a temple to the God of Israel, why not? And if these people don’t want to work to build the temple, then maybe they should just convert. But then who would build all the other impressive buildings like the one dedicated to the Egyptian Pharaoh’s daughter? Oh the complications of being a king. One of the things we learn in this story is that no matter how impressive the temple was, it could not contain the whole *essence* of God. In fact, no structure, no matter how big or impressive can contain the full essence of God. So, if this is the case, why build a temple in the first place? And what exactly is a temple? What purpose does it serve? How does it bring people closer to God? Here’s where I’m about to tread on some thin ice.

In March 2019, the General Social Survey released data collected in 2018 concerning American political and religious life. This survey has been asking the same questions about religion since it was created in 1972 and is an excellent source for tracking long-term changes in religious life. In 2019, the survey recorded that, for the first time, the religiously unaffiliated or the “Nones” were the same size as the number of Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants combined. That’s a *big*

deal, but not really that surprising. Churches have been shedding members for a long time. For a couple of decades, it was the mainline Protestants who were shrinking in numbers while the evangelical Protestant churches were growing almost exponentially. And the evangelicals thought this was pretty cool too. It's like those ads for the Joe Weider body building program that you'd find on the back of comic books. Evangelicals weren't the skinny kids on the beach getting sand kicked in their face anymore. Now they could kick sand in the bully's face! And before you roll your eyes and say, "That's ridiculous, Jesse" remember I came to faith in the evangelical tradition. It was made very clear to us that we were the victors in the race to the top. Our way was the most righteous way because we were growing, and all those *boring* churches weren't. And that became the dominant narrative until the evangelical churches started losing members too. Let's find out why.

The survey listed a bunch of reasons why churches were losing members, but I want to focus on the top two: Politics and hypocrisy. Surprised? Me neither. In 1978, half of all white weekly churchgoers identified as Democrats and the other half identified as Republicans. In other words, the demographics of the church ... both evangelical and mainline ... looked pretty much like the demographics of the general white population. I don't have time to explain why the survey only included white churches, but it was a deliberate move and not in a bad exclusionary way. So, 1978 – 50/50 in the church as far as political persuasion goes. Forty years later, it's changed, hasn't it? The evangelical church started leaning to the political right and the mainline church started leaning to the political left. If we have learned *anything* by studying the history of Israel ... if we have learned *anything* by studying the life and ministry of Jesus ... if we have learned *anything* about the history of the early church ... it's that whenever corrupt religion gets into bed with corrupt politics, you've got a recipe for disaster. It's what divided Israel, it's what killed Jesus, and it's what turned the early followers of Jesus from a revolutionary spiritual awakening into a bloated hierarchical institution. It happens *every single*

*time*. At least until prophetic reformers come along and literally have a “come to Jesus” talk with the wayward religious folks.

This is the reason the “Nones” ... the religiously unaffiliated ... now match or outnumber Catholics and Evangelical Protestants. When the church hung the proverbial red light in the window and said, “Come on in” to corrupt partisan politics, the people who pay attention to history and thought, “Ugh ... this sounds familiar” said, “No thank you” to the church’s invitation to join. Does this mean that people don’t believe in God anymore? Not at all. The results of the survey showed that one in four Americans no longer affiliate with religions but only 1 in 10 Americans do not believe God exists. In other words, God’s not the problem, it’s the churches!

The second biggest reason the study said churches are losing members is hypocrisy. And I’m not talking general garden variety hypocrisy either, I’m talking about a very specific kind of hypocrisy. Nones have given up on church because they are asked to be responsible to Christ, but then they’re not held responsible to others. In other words, they aren’t practicing the Golden Rule which is, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Yeah, but all people struggle with hypocrisy, right? Yes. But the kind of hypocrisy that bothers the “Nones” is when religious institutions respond irresponsibly to larger social issues. When religious institutions try to hide serious errors, such as trying to cover up clergy sexual abuse rather than remedy the problem, people notice. When religious institutions proclaim that they’re pro-life but it only if it applies to the unborn while everyone else can starve and die people notice! When religious institutions express outrage over one leader who they don’t like for having an extra-marital affair, but then overlook and makes excuses for another who does the same thing over and over without apology, people ... notice. Yes, we are all hypocrites. We have all sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. We are all under the umbrella of God’s grace and forgiveness. But when we pledge our allegiance to an institution who is habitually hypocritical? That’s a problem and we

shouldn't be scratching our heads wondering why no one wants to come to church!

Well that was a cute little rant you had there Pastor Jesse, but what does this have to do with Solomon's Temple? Remember the questions we had in front of us before I launched into my little rant – What is a temple, what purpose does it serve, why build a temple in the first place and how does it bring people closer to God? A temple is a place where God is honored and remembered. It is a visible monument to people's devotion to God. It shows others where you are aligned. It's a place where you can go to set yourself apart from the world and seek God whether it's through rituals, corporate worship, or individual devotion. In other words, a temple is where you can go to draw closer to God's presence. But again a temple is *not* where God is contained or confined or to be seen by only a select few. Temples should bring you closer to God, not *separate* you from God. This temple that Solomon built? It was BIG. It was OPULENT. It was GRAND in size and scale. But it was destroyed when the Babylonians conquered and divided the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and exiled the leaders to the Babylonian capital. During the time that the leaders were in exile, they lamented because they couldn't worship God in their temple. God told the prophets to assure the people that they didn't need a temple to be close to God. Then when the people returned to their homeland from exile, they re-built the temple in Jerusalem. God said, "Okay, if you must build a temple, fine. Just don't mess it up this time. Keep me close to the people and I'll keep you close to me." And of course that didn't last very long. The Romans took control of the land and Herod the Great, who was a notoriously slimy corrupt religious leader and was in Rome's back pocket, decided he was going to do a makeover of the temple and make it bigger and fancier. Because maybe if he did that, he'd get a little more support from the general Jewish population and some brownie points with the Roman governor. But that temple didn't last long either. In 70 AD that temple was sacked and destroyed by Roman Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus to suppress a Jewish riot. But guess what? Even then, with no temple standing, God was still with the people.

When Jesus died, Matthew's gospel says that the veil that separated the holy of holies from the rest of the Temple was torn in two which symbolized that through Christ, God is available and present for all. And all means ... all. The temple in Jerusalem was never built again. And yet, throughout history, we've somehow felt it necessary to build our temples and our institutions without asking, "Whose house is this anyway? Our house, or God's house?" As God tried to tell David back in 2 Samuel - "I don't need a temple if it only serves to separate me from the people."

This collection of books that we call the Holy Bible isn't just a collection of quotes and platitudes that we give to people when they're feeling down. It's a collection of divinely inspired wisdom, history, poetry, parables, narratives and philosophy that has been gifted to us so that we may draw closer to God and be reconciled. Here is everything we need to experience God among us. And yet we want to build temples with walls and courtyards and specific places where people are allowed or not allowed to be depending on their level of holiness. "Yeah, but Jesse, aren't we in a temple right now?" Sort of. As I said earlier, a temple is a place where God is honored and remembered which is what we do here every week at the table. It's a visible monument to our devotion to God. Hopefully people in the community know who we are and who we follow when they see us at work. We utilize rituals, corporate worship, and individual devotion to draw closer to God's presence. But hopefully we recognize that it's just a building. The real temple is this stuff that we are made of. We all have everything we need to do all these things whether we're here in this building or whether we're not. Whose house is this ... whose temple is this? As God's people created in God's image, *we* are the living temples of the Holy Spirit. And if we're ever going to reach the "Nones," we're going to have to start living as if this were true.