

Glory of God in a chaotic world

1 Kings 8

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The daily news is filled with forest fires, Taliban, hunger, and pandemic. That is not a pretty picture.

It is not strange if you sometimes feel discouraged and down by looking at the big picture of our world.

And then, look at the small picture, in the mirror. For me, that is also not a pretty view. Scary really.

What do you see when you look? A person with evermore wrinkles, pain in the back, blood pressure problems, you see someone who is losing friends and family through illness and death.



The universe seems to be chaotic, and our personal life also knows its ups and downs.

It is easy to lose hope. But we will not: As Christians we are people of hope in God and bright hope for the future. Solomon, St Paul and Jesus show us the way.

1. God's glory in His house

Solomon had priests carry the Ark of the Covenant into the temple that he had finished building in Jerusalem. That Ark of the Covenant had been kept in a tent in Zion, not far from this brand new Temple.

The Ark - this golden chest that symbolised the presence of God - was now placed in its proper location, in the Holy of Holies.

When that happened, the Temple was filled with the majesty, the glory of God. It was overwhelming for those who were in the Temple. A thick cloud filled the Temple.

The Hebrew word for glory is kabod; that means literally heaviness. It means the heaviness of the presence of God.

How can you doubt God, if you have such an experience. How can you not be a person of faith and hope when God seems so tangible.

At the same time, the density of the cloud also symbolised that God was invisible, and in a way, unknowable in his essence.

You know God is there, but as He is God, He cannot be seen, or predicted, or understood.

I am sure that sometimes in church, or in your private time of prayer, you have an experience that is to an extent comparable to what happened in that Temple in Jerusalem.

You just deeply sense God's presence, but you cannot put your finger on Him. God cannot be traced, or calculated.

There will always be mysteries surrounding God and how He deals with our world, and with us. Life and the universe is not transparent.



Solomon prayed to God in that holy moment. Surprisingly, he did not focus on how great that moment was, he actually focused on the relativity of the Temple.

The idea that we can contain God in a building, or in a structure in our mind, the idea that God can be circumscribed by our understanding, is ludicrous, because God is God, and Solomon testifies to this.

The Jewish scholar Robert Alter recently finished a beautiful English translation of the Old Testament. In his translation, Solomon prayed this:

“Can God really dwell on earth? Look, the heavens and the heavens beyond the heavens cannot contain You. How much less this house that I have built.”

Solomon made clear that the Temple was symbolically God's dwelling place and he wanted to deflect any notion that God can be contained in any human structure, however beautiful and large.

The Jews were called to pray in the Temple, as we come to church to pray to God. And at times we experience something of the density, the heaviness of the presence of God.

But we know God does not live in church. Because He fills all creation with himself.

2. In this world

Solomon said that even the earth and the heavens cannot contain God. God fills every nook and cranny of the universe with his presence, and He is even beyond that.

The whole universe is like a temple where God lives.

This is actually comforting, because we cannot always be in church to pray. We are, after an hour or so in church, send into the world.

If the whole world is God's temple, then when you are at work, or when you go to the shop, or when you study, or when you clean the garden, God is always there, surrounding you.

And all things that you do, are in fact acts of a priest working in God's temple. What you do is utterly important.

This means that when you sit alone in your apartment, God is there, and you serve God by what you do at home. He is pleased when you water the plants, when you prepare your food, when you clean the car. So whatever you do, do it well!

This is the Jewish and Christian worldview. God is present in his creation, in his world, and with you. And all things you do have meaning for God.

Okay, but look at our world!

What darkness is Afghanistan plunged into? We already have tens of millions of refugees worldwide. How many will be added?

Our climate faces grave challenges.

In many places in the world, people hunger.

If we read our newspaper or watch the news on television we often see misery only.

It is easy to think that the forces of darkness are more densely present than God himself.

But that is a mistake. Yes, they mess with God's Temple, but our world is still God's Temple.

The 8 o'clock news, or the newspaper, these media major on misery. That is what they are paid to do.

They show us most of the time what goes wrong in our land, and in the world. Except of course if with sports we win medals.

But most of the time, news is about people killed, not about healthy babies being born. It is about forest fires, not about the trees every year becoming green again.

If the daily news depresses you too much, why not turn it off sometimes. Sure, it is good to know what goes on, but why let it push you down.

What is going on in other parts of the world can be awful, but be realistic. The fact that you know what happens in Afghanistan does not impact the situation there, and it does not change your life.

Instead, go sometimes for a walk, sit on a bench, enjoy the sunshine, or sit inside and enjoy the rain, and see God's presence in the beauty that surrounds you. Enjoy the moment that God gives you.



According to St Paul, all people can know God's invisible attributes, his eternal power and his divine nature, from the things that He made.

Watch the world in its beauty and you do see something of the glory of God. If you open your heart and your mind for Him.

But that presupposes of you an act of looking, of listening, of putting your mind to it.

Look at nature, look at other people, and look with a purpose. See what God made and what He gave you to enjoy.

He is there - surrounding your life with his care.

If you see that, if that satisfies your heart, you are better able to also face the problems that surround us. Then you can with more confidence pray to God your Father and the Sustainer of our world.

No, we do not close our eyes for misery - even in our own lives we are confronted with the darkness that Paul writes about to the Ephesians.

But the thickness of Gods presence, his glory, is much more real than evil and problems and darkness. All that will one day evaporate like the morning mist when the sun goes up.



3. In Jesus Christ

The Temple of Solomon and the church help us to focus on God and his goodness. The church points you again and again to God, and where to look for Him.

In regard to the Temple, Solomon wanted above all things that God would listen to His people when they would pray to Him when they felt overwhelmed by darkness. We have read that Solomon prayed that God would listen to “his cry and his prayer.”

Solomon's cry - the Hebrew word for cry is actually rinnah, What does that mean? One Jewish commentary that I looked up, says: “The word rinnah denotes song of praise which precedes the prayer. Solomon opens his prayer by acclaiming God's omnipotence.”

Maybe Solomon referred to the songs of the priests who had just brought the Kerk into the Temple.

In the midst of darkness - a song of praise. Last week Dorienke spoke about the power of song.

A song of praise means, you focus first on who God is. You look at the light before you begin to pray against the darkness.

Everyone who regularly walks at night in the darkness, knows that you get into trouble if you stare at where you walk.

To know where to walk you must look up, to catch the light of the moon in your eyes and to see the whole context.

In the midst of darkness, we look at the whole context and at the light - we look to God and we praise him. And only then do we give him our shopping list of desires.

Paul, when he speaks of how to defeat the darkness in our world, has similar advise.

He tells us that in order to stand strong and maintain our hope and joy, we have to arm ourselves. We must do something.

What is the armour we need? Paul first speaks of the importance of truth, righteousness, and peace. Those are characteristics of God himself. Of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“I am the truth,” He said. “He is our righteousness”, Pauls writes to the Corinthians. “I give you my peace,” Jesus told his disciples.

When you feel overwhelmed by misery, try to sing a song, or speak words, that focus on the greatness and goodness of God. Set your eyes on Him - truth, righteousness, peace.

Next, in Ephesians 6, Paul lists faith, and your salvation, the word of God, and prayer. That is what we do.

After you have looked at the mighty presence and goodness of God, his love for you, you then put your trust in Him, you ponder how He has always been your helper in need and how He will never stop doing that. You read the Bible. You pray.

Conclusion

So if you find it hard to see God in the midst of our world, ask yourself - do you let the news on TV shape your mind, or the message of Jesus Christ.

If you find it hard to see God’s glory in this world, are you actually trying to see it. You must do something to see it. Nothing of value comes easy.

Ultimately, we see the glory of God in this world, by looking at Jesus Christ. The truth, our peace, the light of the world.

Peter said to Jesus: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’

Jesus has the words of eternal life. Eternal life, that means: life in its richness, life in its abundance, and life that never ends.

That life is so much stronger, so much thicker, so much more real, than the darkness.

So against the darkness, against discouragement, look in the right direction: look at the light of the world, at Jesus Christ, and you find God on your side.

Amen.