

“Will God Indeed Dwell with Man?”

Rev. Dr. Steve Woodworth

Series: *Advent*

Bible Text: 2 Chronicles 6:12-21

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As Hobie had mentioned earlier, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Steve Woodworth, one of the pastors here, and as he just prayed, just a couple of things of housekeeping as we get started, first and foremost, as he said, we've got a preview service down in Toccoa this morning, and so we had just finished up a three-week series on church planting, preparing our people for those that are called, for those that are sent, for those that are sending, and now we make a transition. So if you are here and you're visiting, it's typical for us to spend almost an entire semester, even the fall, the spring, just working through one book, passage by passage, but we do take a break, and for the next three weeks, we're in the season of Advent. That's the Latin term simply means coming. It's a time of preparation, it's a time of preparing, it's appropriate. We were just talking last week, as the pastors we meet every Wednesday to talk about our sermon and prep, and talking about the communion, and Hobie was telling us that there was a time, not too long ago, even in our own country in which when people were getting ready to take communion, the pastors would go house to house for the two weeks before and personally examine every single person in their flock about what they believed to assure that they were prepared to be at the table, and I thought, man, if we're doing that for communion, how much more for our preparation for Advent, that we are celebrating the incarnation, and so we're not a church that does a lot with the church calendar, but we do do it a couple times of year, one for Advent, and then for Easter, the incarnation, the resurrection. And so for the next three weeks, we'll be looking at some passages that really do fall along this theme of God with us. Even in the passage today, King Solomon asked the question, can indeed God come and dwell with man? So that's going to be the focus of our time for the next three weeks.

So to set the stage here, you can open your Bibles to second chronicles. This is in the history of Israel after David is gone and his son Solomon is come to the throne, and they are preparing now the dedication day of the temple, not just any temple, but the first physical permanent temple in which Israel's God will dwell with man. And so that's the scene, and this is the opening prayer for Solomon after seven years of building this temple in which he stands before the people of Israel and begins to pray a prayer of dedication for this temple. So second chronicles, chapter six, verses 12 to 21,

Then Solomon stood before the alter of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands. Solomon had made a bronze platform, five cubits long, five cubits wide, and three cubits high, and had set it in the court, and he stood on it, and then he knelt on his knees in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands towards heaven, and said, oh Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walked before you with all their heart, who have kept with your servant David, my father, what you declared to him, you spoke with your mouth and with your hand have fulfilled it this day. Now therefore, oh, Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant David, my father, what you have promised him saying, you shall not lack a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons pay close attention to their ways to walk in my laws as you have walked before me. Now therefore, oh, Lord, God of Israel, let your word be confirmed which you have spoken to your servant David, but will God indeed dwell with man on earth, behold, heaven in the highest heaven cannot contain you how much less this house that I have built. It have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, oh, Lord, my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you, that your eyes may be open day and night towards this house, the place where you have promised to set your name, that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers towards this place, and listen to the pleas of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place, and listen from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.

Father, as we come to this text this morning separated by so many hundreds of years, Father, it's difficult for us to place ourselves in the pages of this story, Lord, and yet it is so fundamental for us to understand where we have come from, the foreshadowing that you had given us, Lord, that we might properly understand what it means when Jesus calls Himself the temple and even more so that we are too. Father, would you give our eyes the ability to see deep spiritual things, not for knowledge sake only, Father? In fact, we would pray this morning that if there's anything that I say that's false today, Lord, it would just fall away, but that what is true, Lord, it would actually change us. They would move from just head knowledge to heart knowledge that we would apply it, Lord, that it would take root in our hearts and it would bear fruit, and that we would be a people who left changed, that we would see Jesus Christ lifted up today, and as a result of that, we would leave looking more like Him than when we first entered, it's in His name that we pray. Amen.

For those of you that might be privileged enough to have the superpower of ADD, like I do, this will come of no surprise, but for some of you this will drive you crazy, I'm sure. There has never been a time in my life where I haven't been simultaneously working through three or four different books at any given time, and I know there's many of you, because you've told me that it's almost impossible for you to pick up a book and not go all the way through that one book before you start another one, but my brain doesn't work like that, so at any given time, depending on the mood, I've got a whole bunch of different books, and they are all vastly different, and so it's a strange thing, and it's happened this month, where these two books, completely, totally different, totally different authors, subjects, genres, are all of a sudden talking

about the same exact thing. And the two books right now that have been doing that, I'm reading one book on the art of hunting with hawks, and this other book about a guy who's trying to make the case that the internet is possessed by demons, and that the Antichrist is not going to be a person, but it's going to be AI, that we create the Antichrist. So those are the two books that are on my shelf right now, but both of them are talking about a loss of rootedness in our world today, a loss of connectedness, a sense of the past that in our technological age, not only become disconnected from one another, but from time itself, everything is the here, everything is the moment, everything is the future with almost no connection at all to history or past or generations that have gone before, and so the lady who's talking about hunting with hawks, she says this is the attraction, it's such a bizarre thing that we're still doing this hundreds of years later, but if you talk to anybody who is chosen to train up a hawk to hunt, there's something about it that lets you be connected to the time past, right? And the man talking about the internet, well I'm just going to let you read that book because that's just a whole lot of crazy, but you can imagine where he's going with that.

And so for us today, I was thinking about that, this idea of rootedness, that Hovie last week at the end of his sermon, if you didn't hear it, he began to speak about the fact that we are the temple of God, right? That's what the scriptures say. And it struck me as I was getting prepared for this, what does that even mean to us? If we don't understand what the temple was, if we don't understand what this great symbol for all of Israel and the people of God, what difference does it make that you and I are the temple of God? And that happens again and again and again with so much of the language of the scriptures, and it's often been said that the best commentary for the New Testament is the Old Testament, and the best commentary for the Old Testament is the New Testament, that you cannot have one without the other. And so today we'll spend some time in the Old Testament book of Second Chronicles where we see the very first temple of God being built in the hopes that everything that the New Testament says about Christ and us being the temple will finally make sense. That's our hope today.

So just a couple of points, actually, we're going to do this very simply, the temple then and the temple now. And I'm going to spend the majority of that time on the temple then, because as I always teach my preaching students whenever I'm preaching overseas is that it is essential that you get to decide at the beginning of a passage how big is the river that your people are going to have to cross, right? If it's something that we can understand, it's in our language, it's in our time, that's one thing, but when we're talking about something like the Old Testament temple, we're separated by culture and language and even religious practices, we've got a lot to cover there. So we'll spend the majority of our time talking about what it was and what it meant to the people of Israel that they had built the temple for God and then we'll talk about what it means for us today.

So as we'll see in this passage, Solomon's temple, Hovie had already alluded to it, it's a foreshadowing. You'll keep hearing that a bunch today. Like the rest of the Old Testament, it's a signpost. It is a signpost along the story of redemptive history. It's one more snapshot that God is giving us in order to prepare us for what is to come eventually, his son. So every ritual, every piece of furniture, every aspect of the temple itself from the altar to the candles to the curtains

to the court to the Holy of Holies, it's all a living metaphor. God is giving us a very tangible word picture of all the theology that is going to come once Jesus Christ comes and dwells in the flesh and is among us and becomes the temple of God, that God was sending the One. That everything leading up to that was to help us understand just exactly what that meant.

So, we'll give a little bit of background first to this passage in particular. The main character obviously is King Solomon and so the first question should be, well, who's that guy, right? Not everybody here is born and raised in the church, don't understand the importance maybe of somebody like King Solomon, that's great, we're super glad you're here. And King Solomon is, this is what's important to know, he's the son of King David, right? Most of you have probably at least heard of King David, the greatest king of all of Israel and through his union with Bathsheba, that's another story for another day, Solomon comes. Solomon is considered now second only to his dad, the greatest king of all of Israel and he would go on to write the books of the Bible including Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and the great love stories, Song of Songs. But he's a pretty young man here. Most scholars would say somewhere between his mid and late 20s when he's taking on this role. And so what he's doing here is dedicating the temple as we said, a temple that actually his father longed to build. His dad wanted to build this temple and actually we read it just in the book before in First Chronicles when David lived in his house, David said to Nathan the prophet, behold, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of the covenant of the Lord is under a tent, and Nathan said to David, do all that is in your heart for God is with you. But that same night, the word of the Lord came to Nathan, go and tell my servant David, thus says, Lord, it is not you who will build me a house to dwell in. I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me and I will establish his throne forever.

So Solomon is the one who gets to call to finally do the thing that was in his heart, in the heart of his father, to build the first permanent temple for the people of God. And so you even hear it here when David says it, it's that word tabernacle that God, you shouldn't live in a tent. So what had happened all up to that point in Israel's history is that from place to place, all throughout the desert, all through their one, they would have this tabernacle, really was this canvas tent that they could break down, that they could pick up, there are wandering people, and there's no sense of permanence in that. And this is the first time that they are going to finally, with wood and stone and precious metals, build a structure that stands. That's the idea here. Non-permanent structures that could be moved and now a permanent place for God. And so let's talk about this temple.

You can, if you want to, in your own time, you can go back through all of Second Chronicles here, more details about it, but I'll give you a snapshot. I had said already, this temple, grand temple, took seven years to build. And we don't have exact numbers, it's almost impossible for us to know exactly how much it costs, but just what the Bible gives us alone in terms of how much gold and silver that they say was in this, even the smallest estimates would be \$300 million in today's money, which is also the amount that it costs to build the White House in today's money.

So, \$300 million, and the inside of the temple, what they tell us there, it is pure gold. The inside of the temple, pure gold, the entire thing, roof, ceiling, the whole place, it's all decked out in pure gold. It's got carvings, cherubim, bronze pillars, precious stones, imported cedar wood. And then in the most important section of the temple was this windowless court in the back, you've probably heard of this before, the Holy of Holies. And in that place was the ark of the covenant. And again, it's a lot of Old Testament history, but in the ark of the covenant that the people of Israel would travel with, had the commandments, the Ten Commandments on stone and the cherubim were above this great ark and it was set back in the Holy of Holies and that would be the place where in smoke and fire God would come and dwell with His people. That's another whole section of it. It's divided off by this thick, thick curtain. Priests could only go in one day a year. That's all the part of this.

And to set the stage further. I was thinking about this as I was reading it this week that we too, again, if you haven't been here for a while you might not know this, but we also just finished our own building project. Slightly less than \$300 million. No gold that I'm aware of at least. No precious stones, no imported cedars, no ark of the covenant. Took us a little over a year to build that building. And when we hosted our version of a grand opening, I would be willing to say there was plenty of excitement in this place. Lots of enthusiasm and really about the expectation to hope. Look at what God's doing. He's blessing this place. We've got more people to minister to. We've got more space for our children and for counseling and for preaching and for teaching. All sorts of ministry, right? Just this expansion of what God is doing, this enormous blessing. And we were incredibly excited.

But what would it have been like that day if we had never had a church before? Ever. All right? That we had been going from parking lot to parking lot or people's backyards. We would set up tents. And this was it. This was the first time that we were able to walk into an actual building, a permanent place for us and our people. And then even a step further than that, what if this was the first church in the world ever built to God? I mean, that's the situation we're in right here, right? This isn't just like one temple among many's, right? This is the first temple to the God of Yahweh and there has never been one before in the history of the world. That's the celebration that we're walking into.

And so we pick up the story when in the middle of it all Solomon there told that takes this pillar about five feet tall so that he can see all the people, puts it in the center of the court, stands up on it, then kneels, opened his hands and then he prays about this temple. He says Solomon stood before the alter of the Lord and the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands. Solomon made a bronze platform, five cubits long, five cubits wide, three cubits high, set it in the court and he stood on it. He knelt on his knees in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, spread out his hands towards heaven.

So young King Solomon kneels down in front of his people in the finished temple. He spreads out his arms and even in this prayer that we'll walk through, he is helping his people understand and us by extension what this temple represents, what this means for the people of Israel. And

first he speaks about God's exclusivity. He says, *oh Lord God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven and on earth.*

You may not know this, but Solomon's temple was not the only temple in town. In fact, Solomon's temple was surrounded by temples, dedicated to the worship of other gods, gods like Moloch, Ashrith, Chemosh. Each of these temples that had surrounded it were thriving mission points. They were doing the work of evangelism, calling the people of Israel away from Yahweh, saying hey, come on over here, worship our God, our God's better than your God, right? Our God will defeat your God. All of those temptations are around them and there they are, the people of Israel saying, look, there's all of these temples, big, beautiful structures, and here we are sitting in a tent. But he says, we're doing this for the God of Israel. In the temple of Moloch, people were invited to come and worship their God through child sacrifice. In the temple of Astra, they participated in self-mutilation, temple prostitution, and in the worship of Chamash, they sacrificed adults, including one of the king's children on the morning of every battle that they would fight.

And what Solomon is saying is no small thing, that the people of Israel are set apart. And that the God that they were worshiping is not like these gods. Their God is not Moloch, or Chamash, or Astra, but Yahweh. Our God is different. God who is entirely unlike all these other false gods. And then Solomon is going to continue to remind them, let's be reminded here, this is what makes our God so different. This is what is so unique about this God, above all other gods, that unlike the other gods, this is a God who remembers, he says. *Solomon prays, you are the God that's keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart, who have kept with your servant David, my father, what you declared to him. You spoke with your mouth and with your hands, you fulfilled it this day.*

That their God, Yahweh, He's a covenant keeper, a God who promises with his mouth and then fulfills it with his hands. And this Yahweh, this God, so unique among the gods of that time, is marked out by steadfast love. That's that word hesed, you've probably heard that. It's unlike any other kind of love that we talk about. It's a divine love, it's a self-sacrificing love, it's a love that is costly. It is saying, you are unworthy of the love that I'm giving you, but even I will lay down my life so that you might receive it. It's that kind of love, not even a human love, an entirely divine love for a father to his children. And all the other gods being worshiped around them, every other God that was being worshipped worked the other way around. Instead of sacrificing themselves for their people, they demanded that their people be sacrificed to them, not Yahweh. There is no God like you.

Further, Solomon reminds of this great intimacy that this is the meeting place of God and man. You can hear it in his prayer. And I believe it's a genuine question. It's hard to read in the text. You don't know exactly how he's saying it or what the tone is, but when Solomon stands up and says, but will God indeed dwell with man? I don't think it's rhetorical. I don't. I sort of imagine this scene of great anticipation. You've experienced this before, right? Where there's a great hope, a faith that something great might happen. Maybe you're on the brink of getting the job and you've gone through one interview, then two interviews and three interviews and you start

to allow yourself to hope a little bit like, hey, maybe this is going to happen, right? Or your favorite team is like having the comeback, right? And you don't want to say it because you don't want to jinx it, but you think like they might actually win this game, right? Or for those of you that have given birth before, right? It's like you get to that ninth month and then the reality sets in. This is about to happen, right?

All these things that we've been waiting for. That's what I hear in Solomon. Like seven years we've been building this building, seven years and you promised, Lord, that you would come and dwell with your people. And he's asking this question almost out loud, almost in a sense of worship. God, is this about to be real?

Is God really going to come and dwell with us?

But will God indeed dwell with man?

Are you going to come down and be with us?

And that was not true. In any other temple before or since, because the gods they worship didn't exist, they were no gods at all. There was no God to come down and dwell with his people. The other temples, they were filled. They were filled with symbols and totems and all sorts of idols that only could represent that God. That's all they could do, but not Yahweh. The only true living God was about to come down and be with his people.

And as if that were not enough, what makes this temple particularly unique is that the God of Israel would not only meet with them, but Solomon says, and when you come and when we pray to you and when you hear from us, forgive us. Listen to the pleas of your servant and your people when they pray towards this place and listen from heaven your dwelling place and when you hear, forgive.

The temple is a place of worship it's a place of sacrifice. It's filled with all the sights and sounds and smells of animals being slaughtered. Their blood being poured out, their bodies being burned in the fire as substitutes, for these fallen human beings who long to have their sins forgiven and reconciliation with God possible.

During this particular service here, you'll read later on, that Solomon himself sacrificed 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep that day. I don't even know what 22,000 oxen looks like. I've never seen that before in my life and certainly not to add to it, 120,000 sheep for the people of Israel. And I think when you read that, when you hear that, when I hear that, and scholars have done this before, it's easy to question whether or not is Solomon just copying the practices of all the other temples that are around there? Maybe this isn't something new. Maybe he's just like worshiping God in his own way, but this is their God, that's their God, but it couldn't be further from the truth. The people giving sacrifices in the other temples, not only were they not just animals, but they included their children and themselves, but it wasn't even the reason they were sacrificing them. It was a means of appeasement. They were slaves. The relationship was fundamentally

different with these other false gods. They were slaves. They were constantly sacrificing their own bodies and their own children, and it was a transactional relationship. Their gods were vindictive. Their gods were selfish. They were lords over the people. And so all the people are doing, and all of their bloodshed and sacrifice were hoping against hope that they could just kill enough things that their God would be satisfied and would finally give them what they want.

It's not at all what the people of Israel are doing here. Yahweh is not like the other gods. He is perfect and his people are not, but he longs to be with him. That's the hope here. God longs to be with his people. It is sin that separates us. It's the entire point of all of creation, that union between the Creator and his creation. God coming to us, that the Trinitarian divine love spilled over, that God might bring us into it, but God cannot be in the presence of evil. So the penalty for the rebellion is that life had to be given. Blood had to be shed. Not to get God to do something for them, but in order that they might be forgiven, and forgiven so they might be fully reconciled to their God.

And so Solomon's temple is not designed to be a monument, to just mere religion. But this is an invitation to the people of Israel and to us, to a real living, right relationship with a living God. Solomon prays that God's eyes might be open day and night towards this house.

He says, this is the place where you have set your name.

That this is the place where God speaks to us and we speak to God.

It's the house of prayers spoken, prayers received.

The place of intimacy where God is going to reveal himself and can be known fully.

And it's the place where Solomon's question can finally be answered. Can God indeed dwell with man on earth? And as soon as he prays that prayer, it's answered with a yes.

And so if you continue reading on beyond the passage that we talked about today, as soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. And the priests could not even enter the house of the Lord because it was so full of the glory of God. They bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord saying for he is good. His steadfast love endures. As soon as he ended his prayer, fire comes down from heaven and the glory fills the entire temple. No other God came to be with his people like that. Never, because they did not exist. Moloch did not fill his temple. Ashrith did not fill his temple. Chemosh did not fill his temple. Yahweh does.

Can you imagine being there that day?

That's what the writer of Chronicles wants for us. It's not to hear some like old story from small times, but for us to imagine ourselves there in that moment. Seven years of building this

building, hoping against hope if we build it will the Lord come, will he come? Can God indeed dwell with man? And Solomon before the people, and he closes his prayer and out of the heavens comes fire and glory fills the temple. What a moment.

And now I want you to imagine that 400 years after that moment, the Babylonians would come into town and burn it all to the ground. Gone. Their temple was gone. Their permanent resting place of God among the people, gone. They're sent into slavery. And then I want you to imagine those people coming back and the whole time they're gone they're just longing to get back to that place, to rebuild the temple, to be with God again. It's exactly what they do. They come back from slavery. They build the second temple and then 400 years later Rome is going to come and completely burn it to the ground. And you can imagine during all the years between that what they want most is to go back to that place and build the temple again. But the physical place where that temple was, it would be impossible for them to do it because right now on that same location stands an enormous Muslim mosque.

And that is a really big oversimplification of all the problems in the Middle East right now. So if you want to know more, you can talk to Sarah Lanier. But that's why you hear so much. I mean, honestly, this is why you hear about it. So much about the fighting that's going on in the Middle East and about the people of Israel and the state of Israel and the need for this temple. You've probably heard plenty about it. This is why they've only had two of them. They want to rebuild the temple. God cannot come back and be with their people again until they build this temple. And now you can imagine why, when Jesus says what he says, it's so controversial.

So let's talk about the temple now.

Given all of that history, given everything that's gone on at that time, now I want you to hear what Hobie had read earlier from John. Jesus comes in to Jerusalem riding on a donkey. It's the triumphal entry. He goes into town, goes into that second temple that they built and he cleans house. This is the scene where he goes in, He's furious with the money changers, turns the tables over, and the Jews come to him, the leaders, and they say, what sign can you give us to prove your authority to do all this, to come into our temple and turn over the tables. So what Jesus says is, destroy this temple. I'll raise it again in three days.

Now again, given the story up until this point, to the practicing Jew of Jesus' day, talks of temples being destroyed was fighting words. It's a really big deal. Jesus in essence is saying, go ahead and watch. This temple that took you over 40 years to build, we can take it to the ground. This central metaphor and symbol that is more important than anything else in all of the Jewish religion at the time, he's saying, let's take it down. I'll build it again in three days.

What Jesus is saying here is not only a prediction of what Rome would actually do in 70 AD, more important a declaration that even death was not going to stop God from getting to his people. That after three days, Christ would rise again. And after his victory on the cross, what Jesus is saying is what the New Testament writers understood, is that after Christ's final sacrifice, it is finished.

That no temple would ever be necessary again.

That's exactly what Tim Keller says in the quote on the front of your bulletin there. He says, Jesus Christ says, kill me in three days, not only this temple, but all temples in the whole world will be out of business.

Then he says, this is the most stunning thing any human being has ever said.

It might be hyperbole, but it's a valid point, right? One of the most stunning things any human being is that, because what he's saying is like, all these things that we have built as human beings as testimonies to religion are attempts to get to God. He's saying Christ is going to come and finally make the way once and for all, for all people to be in the presence of God. And that's what he says, not just this temple, all temples in the whole world are going to be out of business because of what Jesus has done. Because every temple that came before was just a foreshadowing of the one who would come and fulfill all of its promises, not once, but forever.

John 1:1 tells us in his famous passage, *the word became flesh and tabernacled among us*. You've probably heard that before. That word tabernacle. He's referencing back to the same exact thing that they were talking about here about the temple is that Jesus says, I will come and I will be with you people. I will tabernacle with you just like those old tabernacle poles that we would pick up the tent and we would move it from place to place saying, I'm coming to be with you in that way. That all of the concentrated Shaking glory of God that was present on that day, the temple was open in the midst of God. Clouds of smoke and fire hidden behind his people in a tent and a curtain has all at once, Jesus said and the New Testament writers agree, all at once has been revealed in the coming of Jesus.

Everything about that moment, again, that we could go back to and we can imagine that the seven years of building and all of the blood and all of the sacrifice and all of God's glory coming down, everything concentrated in that moment the people falling on their faces is saying when Jesus Christ shows up, it's in him now.

All of that, it is in Jesus Christ.

Christ is the exclusiveness of God that no one can come to God apart from Christ, no name under heaven and earth by which he can be saved.

Christ is the constant source of remembrance of what God has done, the ultimate fulfillment of every single promise he has ever given. All of his promises are yes and amen in Christ.

He's the source of the greatest intimacy possible with God, our union with Christ, in which we become sons, heirs to the kingdom, recipients of all the spiritual blessings of the heavens in Jesus Christ.

The final lamb that was slain. The last, the greatest sacrifice covers the sins of the world.

And now we want to move from that to something even more unbelievable in many ways. It's what Hovie hit on last week. We take all of that understanding of the physical temple. Now, God with us permanently in the presence of Jesus Christ, and then Christ himself says, you are now a temple as well. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16;

don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you. God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple for God's temple is holy and you are that temple.

You are that temple.

And I want you to wrestle with that in the same exact way that the original hearers would've wrestled it, why so many Jewish people had such a difficult time embracing Christianity because they said things like this, like there's no more need for a temple. All of the things that you have been working for almost your entire life, generation to generation to generation, is the importance of building this temple and having God's presence with us. And Jesus comes and says, I'm the temple. And then he says, after I come back, you are the temple now. You. I'm going to pour my spirit, that spirit, the presence of God that settled on this temple is now inside of you.

And you can almost hear the original hearers say okay, that's a bit too far. That's a bit too far. That's so incredibly radical for us to hear. And again, because we don't understand the temple, it falls on deaf ears. Yeah, we're the temple. That's just a metaphor. Oh, friends, it's so much more than a metaphor. It tells us so much about our relationship with God, that God could not possibly be closer to his people, that he would indwell them. That's what he's saying.

That Christmas, what we're celebrating in the incarnation, is not a quaint story of mangers and wise men and guiding stars. It's the story of God himself coming, not in fire, not in power, not as he did in the Old Testament, but as a helpless baby to an unwed teenage mother from the backwaters of Bethlehem. That's how he chooses to come. He came without money or pomp or power. He comes in weakness and suffering and marginalization. He comes in human flesh so that he might fully and finally identify with his rebellious and broken and fallen creation like us. And when he came, much of the world rejected him, didn't they? He claimed to be the temple, the meeting place of God, the presence of God, the center of the sacrificial system, the place of worship and forgiveness and identity.

Can God dwell with man?

Some people in his day said, absolutely not, not this way. It's not going to happen like this. He can't be in our huge temples. And if we follow all the rules and we do all the sacrifices right, and we walk in the right way, and we chant the right things, and we light the right candles, then maybe God can come and Jesus comes and says, God is here.

He's here.

Not only can God dwell with man, he has, and not only has, he still does. His temple, the temple of Christ was raised on the third day. Broken down and then raised. Sent his Holy Spirit that we not only would have Christ as our temple, but we would become temples ourselves. Everything that unfolded that day, hold on to that word picture, the smoke, the sacrifice, the power, the splendor, the very presence of God himself being poured out into us, fragile jars of clay, the Bible says, now possess the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

So I end with this. I don't personally care how any of you want to celebrate Christmas in your own family traditions, but I do want to stress this point that if somehow, some way, the stories of trees, maybe a guy in a red suit breaking into your house, presents on the tree, if that somehow is a more exciting story to you than this one, I would say there is something fundamentally broken in our relationship with God. That God would come, dwell with his people permanently, that the Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is now with us, that God did not stay in the heavens and just descend to the Holy of Holies, but sent himself in our flesh that he might be with us forever.

The birth of Christ is not just a moment in time that we look back on, friends. It is the moment in human history where time and eternity touch. Where eternity, all of eternity breaks into the story. This is why our familiar hymn says this;

O come, O come, thou lord of might, who to thy tribes on Sinai's height, in ancient times didst give the law, in cloud and majesty in awe, rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel.

It is a plea by the hymn writer, right? It is an invitation that in ancient times he says, God, I know how you used to come to your people. I know that you would take these tribes and you would go up on Sinai's heights, and I know that in those places you gave them the law, and then in cloud and in majesty you would come and dwell on your people and then he breaks and he says, oh, but not for us, God, not for us, rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come thee, will come to you now, Israel.

And I make the same plea today, for all of us as a people to put away our idols, to put away our sacrifices, all of our feeble attempts to make ourselves worthy of being in God's presence, we rejoice, rejoice that Emmanuel was born and God has come to you, has come to me, has come to us as a foretaste of eternity when we will see him face to face glorified, perfected.

And that, friends, is why we celebrate Christmas. That the temple of God has come to us, has made us a temple in which to dwell, rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel who has come to us, all of us, oh, Israel. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, we are, I hope, overwhelmed, genuinely overwhelmed, Father. We can't possibly cover this in 30 to 40 minutes, how great this truth is, Lord. We need your spirit to come to make it real

to us, Father. Would you overwhelm us, Lord, with the understanding that you so desire to be with your people, that you literally stopped at nothing? Even the sacrifice of your own son, the very promise that Solomon says, his hesed, steadfast love, a love that is costly, a love that lays down his life, you did it. Father, for those of us here today who hear this message and recognize, I don't live in light of that reality. I don't live as if the spirit that raised Jesus Christ for the dead is now in me, that I have full access to the presence of God. Oh Father, would you awaken us today, Lord, by your spirit, help us live out this truth, prepare our hearts even as Christ is present here now at this table, Lord, that's for us to celebrate once again in Jesus' name. Amen.