

### Matthew 7: 7-11

Jesus said: <sup>7</sup>“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

<sup>9</sup>“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

A brief summary of 1 Kings 8: The chapter begins as the Ark of the Covenant is brought to the new Temple that Solomon built (v.1-21). Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the Temple follows (v.22-54). What follows is a blessing of the people by Solomon (v. 55-61). Then a celebrative time (14 days!) begins which includes worship and multiple sacrifices that are offered (v. 62-66).

### PRAY

How would you respond if God said to you: “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” It is a blank check. The sky is the limit. What would you ask for? That is exactly what happened to Solomon. <sup>5</sup>*At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” (1 Kings 3:5)*

After acknowledging God’s [hesed] faithful lovingkindness toward his father David and to Solomon himself, he then acknowledges the immensity of the task that will be his as king, ruling over God’s people.

Hence, Solomon responds: <sup>9</sup>*So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”*

This request pleased Jehovah, who blessed Solomon with immense wisdom for which he was known. And, because he asked unselfishly, God also gave him wealth and honor. (1 Kings 3:11-15)

As king, Solomon is tasked with building the temple - a temple of immense beauty, adorned with gold, precious and semi-precious stones, which took seven years to complete (1 Kings 6:38). The temple would house the Ark of the Covenant, that is the portable container which held the stone tablets on which the ten commandments, were engraved. The Ark of the Covenant was portable, because at the time the law was given, the people of God were wandering in the wilderness. They were a people on the move, having been freed from slavery in Egypt. Now, as those who have taken up residence in the Promised Land, the temple is built.

This brings us to the passage that is our focus today. Chapter 8 of 1 Kings, which records the dedication of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, and specifically, Solomon's prayer on that occasion (v, 22-53).

Once the Ark of the Covenant found its resting place in the Holy of Holies, a cloud-God's "shekinah glory" - fills the Temple, signifying the presence of the Lord. This "cloud" was a visible expression of the presence of God; it descended on the top of Mt. Sinai when God made the covenant with the Moses, and gave the people of Israel the law, as a gift (Ex. 14:19-25). This same cloud led the people in the wilderness during the exodus from Egypt. (Exodus 40:19-25).

This is significant because six times, the cloud of God's presence is mentioned in this chapter (1 Kings 8: 9, 16, 21,51, 53). Repetition in the scriptures functions to focus our attention on something. It is repeated for a reason. The emphasis here is on God's presence with the people throughout all their life experiences. Now the Temple becomes God's dwelling place. Or does it? For in v. 27 Solomon asks: "But will God really live on earth? Why, even the highest heavens cannot contain you. How much less this Temple I have built!"

Indeed, the Psalmist reminds us that there is not one place we can go to escape God..."I can never escape from your spirit! I can never get away from your presence." (Psalm 139:7)

Now God lives in human hearts...God dwells with you and me and within each one who names Jesus as Lord. We may revere certain locations...the Temple in Jerusalem, a great cathedral or a humble abbey, or even our own sanctuary - and we might find it "easier" to experience closeness to God in so-called sacred or "thin places". In the redwood forest of the Santa Cruz Mountains of California is such a

place for me. At Mt. Hermon Conference Center there, I have experienced numerous significant encounters with God since I was in high school, during college, and numerous times over the years. Simply getting away from the usual routine, and into a natural setting contribute to the creation of a setting in which I have found it easier to hear and attend to God's voice. Perhaps you have had a similar experience of a special place.

The truth is, God cannot be confined to any particular geographical place. God is both immanent and transcendent - both near to us as our own breath, and infinitely above and beyond us. Yet, God's most significant and desirable dwelling place is within each of us.

After some preliminary remarks, Solomon addressed the gathered community (v. 14-21) reminding the people of God's [hesed] faithful love, as well as the chosenness of his father David, and the assurance of God's blessing both upon Solomon and the people.

Then Solomon prays. A long prayer. Read 1 Kings 8:23-53. Note patterns that are repeated.

At the heart of this prayer Solomon lifts up a series of circumstances that will motivate God's people to pray. (V. 31-53). A repeated refrain throughout the prayer asks that God "...hear from heaven...and forgive, (v.29, 30, 32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49, 52) or take another appropriate action such as "punish the guilty and acquit the innocent" (v.32), "Return them to this land" v. 33, "give them what they deserve" (v. 39).

Solomon proceeds to name seven different instances of urgent human need:

- Sin against a neighbor (v. 31)
- Defeat in war (v. 33-34)
- Drought / climate change (v. 35-36)
- Plague/pestilence/pandemic (Blight or mildew) (v. 37)
- Prayer of a foreigner (v. 41)
- Prayer in time of war (v.44)
- Prayer in captivity (v.46-51)

In each instance, God's people are urged to pray, and God is urged to hear and take appropriate action.

Then there is a summary petition (v. 52):

“Let your eyes be open to the plea of your servant, and to the plea of your people Israel, listening to them whenever they call to you.”

Thus, this Temple, which is being dedicated, is to be serve primarily as a place where prayers are prayed and heard. Prayer is presented as an antidote to disaster, and an invitation to trust in the One who will hear and who will respond.

However, let us be clear. God is not a celestial “Santa Claus” to whom we present our wish list and if we have been good little Christians, we will get what we want. Sorry, that is not the way prayer “works”. I saw a cartoon that featured a child of about 8 years of age, kneeling at the bedside with long written list. His father commented on how great it was to see the boy praying for others. “Oh no,” the boy replied. “This is list is about me. I haven’t even gotten to anybody else!”

Prayer is central to our relationship with God - a daring dialogue with the One with whom we are engaged in a mutual relationship of covenantal faithfulness. (Think for example, of marriage, which is a relationship of covenantal faithfulness.)

“Prayer is an active, trusting relationship that provides a context of hope in the midst of disaster.”\* Faith is properly expressed in “trusting insistent prayers of petition”, in the context of willing obedience to a God whom we worship and serve. (\* W. Bruggeman, p. 38, Virus as a Summons to Faith)

Therefore, we can pray boldly - bringing all our requests to God - because we may be assured that the God to whom we pray is One who is faithful. This is clear in v. 23-25 as Solomon reminds everyone as he prays:

“...LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below - **you who keep your covenant of love** with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. <sup>24</sup>**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.

<sup>25</sup>“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.’”

Note the repetition of the word keep/kept—God is a promise-keeping God.

Another significant note in Solomon’s prayer is the inclusion of “foreigners” (v. 41-43). Often in the OT there were warnings against intermarriage with foreigners, those outside the twelve tribes of Israel. The reason for that was the temptation to worship other gods, the gods of the other tribe or culture, a god other than YHWH, and they were numerous.

But here, Solomon says that due to Jehovah’s reputation as one who bears a “great name and [a] mighty hand and [an] outstretched arm” (v.42), foreigners will hear about this God, and... *they [will] come and pray toward this temple, <sup>43</sup>then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, **so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may they know that this house I have built bears your Name.** (1 Kings 8:41-43)*

Solomon asks God to respond to the prayers of “foreigners” - non-Jews, like you and me—to the end “...that ALL the peoples of the earth may know and fear” Jehovah/YHWH. Friends, this is good news, is it not? We can be grateful that very early in the history of God’s people, there is an effort of inclusion. *Everyone* is invited into a relationship with the Living God of Israel! Each one is made in God’s image and is welcome to engage God in prayer.

A few years ago, The Atlantic magazine published an article titled “Surviving Anxiety”. \*The author, Scott Stossel, described his efforts to deal with debilitating anxiety that has plagued him his entire life, since an early age. He sought professional help, tried eight varieties of therapy, hypnosis, mediation, role playing, self help books, massage, acupuncture, yoga, and numerous medications. He also tried alcoholic beverages, but he concluded ‘nothing worked’. Nothing. \*(12-22-2013). Of course, anxiety is real. It is truly sad and disappointing that this man did not find any relief at all.

Contrast that with Marie Wiebe, who experienced a massive stroke that left her totally disabled. With no history of stroke or its contributing factors, she was middle-aged when her life changed so dramatically. She required 24-hour nursing care, help turning over in bed and sitting up. Physical therapy for 6 hours a day, 6

days a week for 6 months, and still she could not swallow on her own. Needless to say, it was a long recovery. Did I say it was a long recovery?

With the support of her loving husband and children, and her faith community, after over two years, Marie has recovered numerous abilities, but still is dependent on the help of others.

In her own words: “During all of this, I couldn’t have lived one hour without Jesus. Because of my handicap, I cannot live one moment, one hour, one day on my own. I have learned that God values *not* what I do, but the time I spend with him. God let all the “doing” fall away; I spend a lot of time “being” with God in prayer, contemplation, and reading God’s Word.”

Friends, it is only a matter of time before each of us faces a challenge of significance - be it personal, financial, or otherwise. Presently all of us are facing this pandemic together. How shall we respond? Where is God and what is the role of prayer?

God is as close as the very breath you and I breathe. The promise of God is to listen, to hear our prayers and to respond. We are invited/encouraged by Jesus to “ask, seek, knock” and God will respond. I cannot promise that we will always receive the answers that we seek, but we might in fact, receive something even better!

May we not give up, may we be encouraged to pray with boldness, assured that God is near. God cares. God hears. God understands. God is trustworthy. God is faithful.

The name Thomas Chisholm is likely unfamiliar to you. He struggled his whole life long with debilitating health issues which caused him to fail at almost everything he tried. But he loved to write poetry. One day, against the backdrop of his countless disappointments, and daily challenges, he wrote the words to the song we will sing as we close our worship today: “Great is Thy Faithfulness”.

May we dare to pray and to ask God for great things; <sup>20</sup>Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Ephesians 3:20-21 New International Version (NIV)