

# **God's Programme and Provision**

*Lessons from History in Chronicles and Kings*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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## God's Programme: A People, a King and a City

Let's take our Bibles and turn to the first book of Chronicles:

Adam, Seth, Enosh; Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared; Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech; Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth. (1:1)

And then, the last chapter:

And they made Solomon the son of David king the second time, and they anointed him as prince for the LORD, and Zadok as priest. Then Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD as king in place of David his father. And he prospered, and all Israel obeyed him. (29:22–23)

I think it can be said without too much injustice to anybody that 1 Chronicles is not every Christian's favourite book! There are some obvious reasons for that—those long lists of names: ten whole chapters of them at the beginning and an almost equal number at the end—names, names, names. There are some Christians indeed—but not you!—who, when they come to the book of Chronicles in the course of their systematic reading of Scripture, have been known to pass by those chapters and not read every name. The trouble is that most of the names aren't pronounceable and they don't mean anything to us. Who knows about Arpachshad and Lud (1:17), and who on earth were they anyway? How can you be interested in what's only a peculiar name on a piece of paper?

Of course, if your grandmother or great grandfather had been mentioned in Chronicles, then you would have been interested. You'd have gone round telling all your friends and relations, 'Do you know, my great grandfather's name is in the book of Chronicles?' And they'd say, 'Where? What is Chronicles? Is that a newspaper?' And you'd say, 'No, Chronicles in the Bible.' And you would turn up the page and the name would be underlined in red. Your great grandfather's name means something to you. The trouble is there are nearly twenty chapters of names, and that's largely all they are—names on a bit of paper.

Of course, once upon a time, those names represented real people like us. They were born and they were somebody's lovely son or beautiful daughter. They grew up full of promise, and their parents thought there was none like them. They lived their lives as best they could, some with success and some with pain and disaster; and then time carried them away. Tonight, they're just names on a bit of paper. Melancholy thought, isn't it? What about you? Of course, you're known to all your circle of friends, and they rejoice in you. Your name is Jean, or whatever your name is, and that means a lot to your friends. But what

about five hundred years from now? You too will be just a name on a bit of paper—meaningless, even to your great-great-great-great grandchildren.

When you start to think like that, it raises big problems about history. What is this phenomenon about—wave after wave of people being born on our little planet Earth and then being overtaken by the next wave and pushed off the stage into eternity? When I was growing up, I thought at last the world had got the chap it wanted, and I was going to do such a lot of great things. The trouble was, just as I was getting ready to do them, another great wave of the new generation came on behind and pushed me off the stage. They're the ones now who are going to do all the big things. I would point out to them that there's another wave coming on behind them as well!

So what would you say of the whole phenomenon? Is the process going anywhere? Is there rhyme or reason in it? Is there a future for it? Or is it an endless succession of waves of people coming on to planet Earth, dying and becoming just a name on a bit of paper? If you put it brutally like that, many people have no answer to the problem. Our atheist and humanist friends have no answer. They put a brave face on it, but their own atheist science tells them that, one way or another, our earth is doomed. They debate as to how the planet is going to come to an end—a hot death or a cold death; or whether the sun is going to blow up and become a red giant so that Earth just evaporates and that's the end. But as far as they know, one day the human race and all the names will end in the silence of the universal grave. They have no hope. It's not, perhaps, the worst thing you can say about unconverted men and women, but it is one of the saddest. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 2, 'They are without God' (v. 12). They are without the Creator at the beginning, and they have no Messiah to look forward to in the future, and therefore they are without hope.

It's a marvellous thing that, having come to know God through his word, we have the answer to the question of what all these names are about. These books, 1–2 Chronicles, are the last books in the Hebrew Scriptures. In our English Bibles, we have Malachi as the last book in our Old Testament, but in the Hebrew Scriptures, to this present day, the last books are 1–2 Chronicles. That is fittingly so, because 1–2 Chronicles are a summary of history starting right from the beginning with Adam and going on almost to the end of the history that is covered in the Old Testament. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah go a little bit further, but not very much.

So 1–2 Chronicles are a summary of Old Testament history, and they stand at the end of the Hebrew canon. The interesting thing is that if you put your question to the historian, the writer of Chronicles, and you say, 'My good man, you recalled all these names and all these generations. Do you perceive any pattern in history? Is there any visible purpose, any movement, any forward look? Is there some pattern in history that would give us hope for the future?' And he will respond with a most affirming, 'Yes, of course there is a pattern, and there is a place where, if you look carefully enough, you will see evidence that God himself has a programme for this world, and there is a future.'

## The emergence of Israel

If you ask him to specify what the pattern is, he will tell you that in these first chapters with their long lists of names—some of the names of the pre-flood people and then of the post-flood people—he comes to what for him is the most significant thing, even in the early history of our planet, and that is the rise of this unique nation, Israel, out of the Gentiles. It was already a unique phenomenon in the days when 1 Chronicles was written, and it remains a unique phenomenon in history. Israel were latecomers among the nations. Many of the others had been started one thousand or two thousand years before Israel came on the scene. Israel were latecomers but from the very first they were unique, for the simple reason that by the time Israel as a nation was born, the rest of the nations were grovelling in the most absurd idolatrous interpretations of the universe that you could wish to come across.

Israel in its very existence stood as God's divine protest against all such idolatrous interpretations. In that, they were unique. If in the ancient world you had asked where we people come from, what it is that controls us and will control the future of ourselves and our planet, these ancients who held this idolatrous view of the universe would have said, 'Why, of course, it's the gods.' And when they listed their gods, you would have seen that most of them were simply deifications of the great impersonal forces of the universe—the storm god, the god of fertility, the sun god and the moon god. Their gods were not the true God. Their predecessors had banished the knowledge of the true God. They didn't like to retain the knowledge of the supreme transcendent Lord Creator. They got rid of him in their thinking, or tried to, with the result they could see that they themselves didn't control the planet nor the forces that order it; and therefore they deified the forces of nature.

Israel were a protest against it; and their protest remains to this present time. If you ask your atheist or humanist friends what their interpretation of the universe is, what is responsible for bringing us human beings here, and what will be responsible for our end and destiny, they won't reply, 'It's the gods,' but they might as well. For what they will say is that what controls us and our destiny are the great impersonal forces of nature—energy, the weak atomic power, the strong atomic power, electromagnetism, gravity, and the processes of physiology, biology and what have you. These are the forces that control us, and all of them are mindless, impersonal forces. What hope is there in that, I wonder?

As we've already said, one of these days those great impersonal forces—if it is they that are ultimately responsible for bringing our planet here and us on it—are going to destroy the planet anyway. We can see easily enough that we won't have to wait very long. One of these days a little virus will get into your system, and it won't have an ounce of sense in its head. It will proceed to tear you to pieces, ruining your brain and your aesthetics and your purposes and your affections. And the horror of the situation is that you'll have the intelligence to see what this thing is doing, but you won't be able to stop it doing it. And if that's all there is, then you might as well give up hope straightaway. You are in a ghastly prison house of mindless forces that one day will crush you out of existence.

Thank God for the biblical revelation, and in particular for God's protest to the nations through the nation of Israel, brought out to witness once more that there is a living Lord, the one true God and Creator, and man is made in his image. Man is vastly superior to the physical forces of the universe. It's good to tell the scientists that these days. Tell them

straight that their atheism is an insult to their intelligence, and that's perfectly true. When you go home tonight and you want to read a book, you'll put the electric light on. Now tell me, is the electric light more important than your brain, or your brain more important than the electric light? And which is more important: my brain or the sun up in the sky? My brain's very tiny and the sun is very big; yet even I can see that my brain is more important than the sun. I know the sun is there: the sun doesn't know I'm here. With the help of scientists, I know how the sun works: it doesn't know how I work. Poor thing, it's only a lot of gas and stuff.

We are self-evidently more important, more significant, than all the vast impersonal forces of the universe put together. One baby's brain is more important than the whole lot of it, and the Bible has been saying it for centuries. Man is not made to be a slave of the impersonal powers. Man is made in the image of God. And though mankind has fallen, God has made a way of redemption, and man can be redeemed. God is going on with his great purpose: for man, made in the image of God, there is hope. It was not the least significant thing in this unique nation of Israel that they not only talked of a God, the Creator, the true God in whose image man is made, but prophet after prophet taught that one day God would send into our world his Messiah, the saviour and redeemer of the world.

### **David and Solomon—Israel's golden age**

Here in this ancient book of Chronicles, the historian asks us to look at the pattern that developed; for, even away back in those centuries, one wonderful thing happened. Not only did God bring out the nation of Israel from the other nations and brought them into their promised land, but he raised up a man by the name of David, King David, anointed by the Lord, who gave Israel victory and liberty from all their enemies. He set them on the road to being a great empire, actually, and when he died and his son Solomon came to the throne, Israel experienced a time of glory and peace and plenty, such as they had never experienced before. The Chronicler recalls it with a great glow in his heart: those were magnificent days when Solomon ruled. There was peace, there was no adversary, war wasn't talked of. In Solomon's day if you saw a piece of silver in the street, you kicked it down the drain because it wasn't worth anything; only gold was any good in those days, such was the wealth. Then the other nations around came and brought to Solomon their glory. He was such a wise king that he attracted the wise men from the East and as they came to learn his wisdom, they brought their presents. The wealth was tremendous.

Then there was this matter of wisdom. If you were at Solomon's table at dinner with His Majesty, that was great fun because halfway through the second course Solomon would start saying, 'Well now, have you considered the hyssop just recently, you know the old herb stuff that comes out of the wall?'

'Well, I did have a bit in my garden, Your Majesty.'

'But have you considered its marvel? I've just written a song about hyssop, because when you examine the hyssop in all the wonder of its functioning, it's just an example of the sheer marvel of creation.'

You've never felt like Solomon, examining a daisy or a flower, and been absorbed with the sheer wonder of the creation around you, until you could have danced for joy and

written a lyric about it! That's how it was with Solomon: he made you sit up and take notice of the wonder that was around you.

The greatest wonder of all was that Solomon was allowed to build God a temple, and the transcendent Lord of creation deigned to come and presence himself in that temple. Just imagine living round the corner from almighty God, and enjoying his creation with him at your elbow, so to speak! They were days of heaven upon earth. And one of the queens that came to hear his wisdom was the dear lady from Ethiopia, and when she came she brought great treasures to give to Solomon. Among them, says the historian, were algum trees. I don't know what algum trees are. I don't know if you have them here in Australia! But Solomon's officials thought they were the very best wood you could get for musical instruments, and they made musical instruments out of them. You should have heard the singing in Solomon's reign, it was tremendous. An age of glory and magnificence such as Israel had never known before.

But it didn't last. The chronicler himself tells you it didn't last and, sensible man, in the second book of Chronicles, he analyses for you all the reasons why it didn't last. If we're going to be realists for the future and have any hope for there being an age of peace and glory to come, we shall have to be realists ourselves and face the reason why. You can have any daydream you like of forming an age of peace and glory in the future, but unless certain basic things can be faced and dealt with, you haven't a hope of any age of peace and glory. So the inspired chronicler analyses for you in the second book why that age of peace and glory under Solomon went down the drain. But it isn't just a gloomy book, because these ancient stories of God's ways with Israel were what you could call prototypes.

### *Prototypes*

What is a prototype? Well, when I was a boy, and you'll know how long ago that is, if an aeroplane went over, we used to run out of school to see the thing. They were funny contraptions: generally bi-planes made of brown paper and wood, and some elastic bands and string! Mostly they came unstuck but on the other hand, they did work some of the time. And the reason they were able to fly at all is that they did embody, even at that crude level, some basic principles of aeronautics. Now, if you watch the big jumbo jet go by at thirty five thousand feet, it looks very different from those first few bi-planes. But the same principles of aeronautics that were embodied in those prototype aeroplanes are now embodied at the vastly higher level of the jumbo jet.

And that's how history has been. When God set his heart upon the redemption of our human race, he began at the humble level. He began, for instance, with Israel, and went through the basic principles of redemption, from the time he redeemed them with the blood of a Passover lamb from the tyranny of Egypt, until the time he brought them into the promised land and then to the age of peace and glory under Solomon. That was only a prototype. Of course it didn't last, but did you notice how the historian described it in that last chapter of the first book of Chronicles? He says that when they made Solomon king the second time, Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord. That's some doing, isn't it? I suppose at that level, it means he sat on the throne that God himself had set up. But what an evocative

phrase it is: Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord. Wonderful as it was, it was only a prototype of something bigger.

### *The glorious fulfilment*

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I'm happy to remind you that if in some lowly sense Solomon of Israel sat on the throne of the Lord, since then vast things have happened. There has come of the seed of David according to the flesh this Jesus Christ, Messiah, redeemer of the world. On the third day he rose again, and on the fortieth day he ascended into heaven. And this man, Jesus, who once worked in a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, literally at this very moment as we sit here, sits on the throne of the Lord. Did you ever hear such a story? And it's true. That's not bad going, if you start with Adam and now we've got this far along that the descendant of Adam, our blessed Lord Jesus, is at this very moment seated on the throne of the Lord. And the New Testament gospel is that in some sense all who trust him are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, and one day shall be bodily transported, and shall sit with him on his throne. Even as at this moment, he has overcome and sat down on his father's throne.

This is the message of history. You may take those Old Testament prophecies, given through Israel's prophets, and you may check them and see how our blessed Lord Jesus in his life and death and resurrection matched the programme that God gave through the ancient prophets. You may like to observe that to this day the nation of Israel is unique still among the nations. I have an elderly Jewish friend in Belfast. He was an Austrian to start with, and only just managed to get out in time to escape Hitler's gas chambers during the war. He has often sat in lectures of mine in the university with the tears running down his face. At dinner with me he would say, 'I don't know if there is a God. Where was God when Hitler was gassing six million of my fellow Jews? I don't know if I believe in God at all. And yet, when I'm thinking like that, I suddenly see a man walking on the other side of the road and I can spot immediately that he's a Jew. Tell me, David, how is it that our nation have maintained their identity all these long centuries, in spite of all that's happened to them?' They still stand unique among the nations. This is God's movement in history. This is the way to look for hope for the future.

Already from that nation, and of the seed of David according to the flesh, has come the greater than Solomon. He already sits on the throne of the Lord. One day he shall come, and he shall reign and eventually he shall set up the great eternity of glory. As we think of that, it might be helpful to spend just a little time looking at some of the steps which were taken in the prototype to get from Adam to the point where a man sat on the throne of the Lord. So let us look at those steps and see what lessons we can learn.

## **The rise of King David**

First of all, according to Chronicles, was the fact of the rise of Israel as a nation, and then swiftly the historian moves to the rise of King David. There was an earlier king by the name of Saul. He rebelled against God and therefore God turned the kingdom over to David, the son of Jesse. The rest of the book of 1 Chronicles is the account of the various stages of



David's rise to power. Just let us look how the historian marks the several stages of David's rise to power.

Therefore the LORD put him [Saul] to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse. (10:14)

Then all Israel gathered together to David . . . And they anointed David king over Israel. (11:1, 3)

And David knew that the LORD had established him as king over Israel, and that his kingdom was highly exalted for the sake of his people Israel. (14:2)

So now, he's not only king but the kingdom is established. But then failings occur. He did what oriental monarchs had a habit of doing. He took more wives and begat more sons and daughters, and thus built up a pretty powerful royal house. Turn over the pages with me now to chapter 18 for the next great stage in David's rise to power.

So David reigned over all Israel, and he administered justice and equity to all his people. (18:14)

Now there follows, not a list of his wives and sons, but a list of the officers of state that were under him—Joab over the army, and Jehoshaphat was the recorder, and such and such were priests, and so forth. And then turn over to Chapter 23.

When David was old and full of days, he made Solomon his son king over Israel. (23:1)

As we shall subsequently find, what happened was that David was semi-retired and he made Solomon co-regent with him. He made his son Solomon king in that sense, and it is against that background that chapter 29 finally says,

And they made Solomon the son of David king the second time. (29:22)

That is, now he was made king in his own right: his father was old and presently died.

### **David's priorities—unity and a capital city**

The rise of David and the steps that David took on the way to establish this great age of peace and plenty in Israel is a lovely story. The first thing David did when he came to the throne of all Israel—he had been king in Hebron over two tribes, and subsequently over the other ten tribes—was to unite them as one nation in a way they had not been united for years. David saw what he had to do to unify that nation, for there never would have been peace unless there had been unity. Names can sound beautiful—Hepzibah and Rosemary and Maximilian and Peter sound nice, but sometimes the reality that the names represent can be a little bit inflexible. They don't always fit together to make a decent picture. Even people with Christian names don't always get on very well! It has been known for Christian churches, instead of being one step from paradise, to become places of disharmony and strife. It's one of the great problems facing politicians trying to get world peace. The problem is not lack of food or lack of minerals. The problem is these names and what they represent.

How do you get people to live together in unity and organize them together so that they make a sensible pattern of life? How would you do it? How would you do it for a whole world? At the level of the prototype, that was the first thing David set about doing when he became king of all twelve tribes, and what he did was this. He went to Jebus, the town that really belonged to Judah originally, but had long since been held by the Jebusites. He went with the armies of all Israel and captured Jebus and turned it into the capital city of the whole nation. They hadn't had a capital city before, worth talking of, and now they had. It was a very wise move on David's part because he didn't choose a city right in the heart of Judah; he chose a city right on the fringe between Benjamin and Judah and the others, so that everybody, whatever tribe they belonged to, should feel that Jerusalem was their city.

Jerusalem became the heartthrob of all the tribes. What Jerusalem meant to the ancient Israelites you can gauge by reading the psalms that the pilgrims used to sing when they went up to Jerusalem and first caught sight of the city and entered its gates:

Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together. (Ps 122:2–3)

To this present day, Jerusalem stands centre to world politics, and centre to Judaism, wherever Jews live around the world. It is a city yet destined to see great things internationally, because it became the very city where our Lord was crucified, and to which he will return—a literal earthly Jerusalem. But more than that, when earth's little history is done and the great eternal city comes out of the new heavens towards the new earth, its name shall be not New Sydney (as you're aware!) but new Jerusalem, the city of the redeemed, the centre of our unity. Listen to Paul:

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. (Gal 4:26)

It's the city that unites all believers. Abraham looked for that city, built on foundations, whose builder and maker is God; built on the great foundation of justification by faith. A Jerusalem which is above, the mother of us all.

The secret of its interest to the ancient Israelite was this: they called it the city of David. When the ten tribes came to David, they said, 'Even when Saul was king it was you that God chose to lead, as you led us out to battle. You brought us home victorious, you were our leader and we came to see that God had made you king, and now we want to make you king.' The secret of their unity was each man's heart loyalty to David. It's going to be the secret of the unity of the universe:

So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father. (Phil 2:10–11)

It is he who fought the great battle of Calvary. It is he who will hold the vast company of the redeemed in eternal union, not by law and regulation but by the personal devotion of every redeemed person to him. Let me ask you, what do you make of that? Is that fairy story stuff? I shall have to come and probe your heart. What is it, my good Christian friend, that

keeps you on the Christian pathway? You say, 'When all is said and done, I love the Lord Jesus.' It's that which, one of these days, will unify the uncountable billions of the redeemed in that eternal city, the city of the great king.

### **David's priorities—the presence of God**

What does David do next? What was the next big move? Well, we read of that in chapters 15–16. First of all he founded the great city Jerusalem, then he brought the ark up to Jerusalem. The first time he did it, he made a mistake: we'll pass by that for the moment and come to the second occasion when he did it properly. He brought the ark up. Not the tabernacle. Things were in great disorder in those days, so he didn't bring up the tabernacle to Jerusalem, but he did bring up the ark to Jerusalem.

We have to ponder that for a moment. We must go back into history to ask what it would have meant to David and to the crowds that lined the road towards Jerusalem and lined the city streets for this tremendous spectacle. To the devout Israelites it wasn't just a golden box with cherubim on the top that was now coming to Jerusalem. Israel fervently believed that on that box, that wooden box overlaid with gold, between the outstretched wings of the cherubim, was the divine presence: the Lord of heaven and earth sat enthroned between the cherubim on that ark. That's what they believed anyway, even if you don't! They believed it so that when they saw the ark coming, it was the Lord coming to Jerusalem. Hence the exceeding fervour of King David as he humbled himself in his devotion before that ark. It was the transcendent Lord now coming to Jerusalem, enthroned invisibly upon the ark of his covenant, coming to Jerusalem to be installed in the city.

You'd have loved to have been there, wouldn't you? But my brother, my sister, one day—not in prototype nor in mere symbol—we shall see him. What a wonder that will be.

Jesus, my Saviour, shall come from on high,  
Sweet is the promise, as weary years fly!  
Oh, I shall see him descending the sky,  
Coming for me, for me!<sup>1</sup>

You'll see him one day coming in his glory: his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives. This is our hope. Said the angels:

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. (Acts 1:11)

Jesus is coming! O sing the glad word!  
Coming for those He redeemed by His blood.  
Coming to reign as the glorified Lord!  
Jesus is coming again!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anon., 'Jesus, my Saviour, to Bethlehem came.'

<sup>2</sup> Daniel W. Whittle (1840–1901), 'Jesus is coming!'

## **David's priorities—enemies defeated**

You say, 'That's only halfway through 1 Chronicles. What happened after that then?' What happened after that, to be brief, is that the last enemies were destroyed. There was the old king of Ammon. He had made himself a nuisance over many centuries, and made himself a desperate nuisance at this stage. It was a complicated warfare, but at last Ammon was conquered, and they took the crown off his head and put it on David's head. And then there were the giants, those great, muscular giants, and David and his men finished off and mopped up, and eventually destroyed the very last of them.

Then came the greatest enemy of the lot. At this stage, when God's purpose was almost completed, Satan rose up and incited David to commit such a sin as nearly ruined the whole thing, and told David to number the people. Even Joab, who was not renowned for his godliness, said, 'But your majesty, why would you want to number the people?' We can see the answer. David had fallen victim to the devil's own sin, the sin of pride. Jerusalem and the whole scheme stood in doubt and danger. The angel of the Lord came with his sword of judgment, inflicting pestilence, and stood over Jerusalem. When David saw the destroying angel, in deep repentance he went out into the open and said, 'Lord, it's I who have sinned, not these sheep. Slay me instead of the sheep' (see 21:17). And the great plague was stayed, and Satan's attempt at the very last to ruin it all, came to nothing.

Our blessed Lord at Calvary, who had never yielded to pride, went forth to meet the judgment of God on our behalf—the shepherd giving himself for the sheep. The Bible tells us that at the end of the millennium, Satan shall have his last fling, but he shall be put down and then the very last enemy of all shall be destroyed, for the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

## **Building for the future**

It's a good story this, isn't it! What followed after that? Well, David started to retire because his eye was on the future. He had reigned until now at last all enemies were put down. But what he had in mind above all things was the building in Jerusalem of the great temple of God. He himself was not allowed to build it. It would have to wait until the reign of his son Solomon and the reign of absolute peace and plenty and glory, then it would be built.

David, in his last years, wanted time to concentrate on what lay at his heart as the most significant thing to do. So he made his son Solomon regent: co-regent to look after the practical affairs of the kingdom, while David gave himself to preparing the materials for the temple and getting ready all the organization of the tribes and the people; so that when the temple was built, each man and woman would be ready to take their place—candlestick makers, bread makers, whoever they were, whatever their gift. So that as each one went about his daily tasks around the great temple, the very glory of God might manifest itself to them and through them. And together their many different gifts would redound to the glorious worship of God, like some vast orchestra—each instrument with its own ability and note being filled with the glory of God and coming back in one glorious harmony to the divine pleasure. That was David's idea, and he spent his last years getting the material and

preparing it so that when the day dawned and the great age began, the temple could be erected.

### **An example for us?**

I put a question to you. If you had retired and didn't have to work anymore, what would you think was the most rewarding thing to do in life? If, like King David, you could afford to let the younger generation earn the cornflakes and give yourself to something that's really worthwhile, what would you do? You say, 'I've always wanted to retire so I could go yachting.' Oh yes, that's good, and would be very pleasant. But is there anything else you'd like to do—something that would last? Well, here's something. To prepare materials for when the great day of eternity dawns, to be used in the erection of the eternal tabernacle of God. That's the goal of history. That is what will give significance to the multimillion names; not only names, but the personalities behind them. That is what is going to give significance and pattern and meaning to them.

Life is but a preparation for that great event. Ours is the privilege, first of all, to see that by God's grace we are prepared and refined, and our gift developed to take part in that great heavenly orchestra of the redeemed. Ours is the supreme privilege, each in his or her different way, to go out and get materials, or to work on material that others have got, and fashion and refine, and help and assist in the saving and polishing and developing of human personalities as they take their place in the great eternal tabernacle of God.

So 1 Chronicles is an interesting story, isn't it? And if that's what it's about, I wonder really what 2 Chronicles is about. But that's for another occasion!

Thank you for your patient listening, and may God bless.

## God's Provision: The House of God

Let us begin our study this evening by reading in the first book of Kings:

Now King David was old and advanced in years. And although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm. (1:1)

Then chapter 8 of this same book, from verse 37:

If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besieges them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind), that they may fear you all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers.

Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name.

If your people go out to battle against their enemy, by whatever way you shall send them, and they pray to the LORD towards the city that you have chosen and the house that I have built for your name, then hear in heaven their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause.

If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near, yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, 'We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly', if they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you towards their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them (for they are your

people, and your heritage, which you brought out of Egypt, from the midst of the iron furnace). Let your eyes be open to the plea of your servant and to the plea of your people Israel, giving ear to them whenever they call to you. For you separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be your heritage, as you declared through Moses your servant, when you brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD. (8:37–53)

May the Lord give us good understanding of his Word.

## **The death of King David**

We do not know the name of the historian whom God inspired to write for us the record of 1–2 Kings, but whoever he was he certainly opened his two volume history with an exceedingly dramatic statement. ‘King David was old,’ says he, and ‘he could not get warm’, and they covered him with blankets as best they could to warm the poor body. But the great David, who once had gone forth to meet the giant Goliath and had won victory after victory for the people of God, was now elderly and at the end of a long and vigorous and varied life. He lay in bed a shrunken old man, and he was terribly cold. They tried every device to keep the poor old boy alive but in the end failed, and great King David died.

When that happened, I imagine there were a lot of people in Israel who felt the very bottom had dropped out of their world. The younger generation couldn’t remember an earth without King David at its centre. The old ones looked back with tremendous longing and joy, as old men and women do, to the good old days when David first came on the scene. They remembered the tremendous military campaigns he had, the enemies he slaughtered, and the giants he overcame. Those were colossal days. ‘We’ve not seen anything like that for a long while’ the old people said whenever they got together. And as for the young folks, he was their hero because he it was who wrote all the new songs. They were tremendous, and everybody sang King David’s psalms and lyrics. So do I today, they last still.

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity. (Ps 32:1–2)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Ps 23:1)

He was the Top of the Pops, if there was such a thing in those far off days. It was David who had brought the nation out of virtual obscurity and strife and division, and united the nation together. It was David who had had that stroke of genius and captured old Jebus and turned it into Jerusalem, the great capital of the newly united nation—the Jerusalem that lasts still. If you go to Jerusalem, you’ll see the bits and pieces of the stones with which David built the Jerusalem of his day. David had been everything, David had done everything. And you can understand why they did their very best to keep King David alive. What would they do without King David? How would they keep things going and keep them at the same level, let alone expand them, if David went? In spite of all their efforts, David died.

## Maintaining God's people?

The writer goes on to tell of the men that came after him. Some of them were half decent. There was Solomon who brought Israel to the great age of glory. In his youth he was sensible, but he died a silly wicked old man and went down into depths of folly. Some of the men that came after him were good men, but a lot of them were very average men, and a good deal of them were very bad men indeed. By and large, the nation went from bad to worse, until the whole lot ended up in captivity. It raises a question. If you can't have David live for a thousand years and the poor old man has got to die, why didn't God raise up a whole succession of Davids? If he could raise up one, he could raise up a whole succession of Davids, and Israel might have been maintained at the zenith of her power and glory. If God could raise up a David, why did he then allow his successors to be, on the whole, such very poor creatures?

But if you start asking questions like that, you'll ask the same thing about Christendom. In the beginning, there is that thrilling book of Acts where we see the tremendous exploits of those spiritual giants—Paul and Peter and James and John and Stephen. What a tremendous thing they did on the earth; but then they all went and died, and the men and women that came after were for the most part pretty ordinary pygmies, although there were some giants now and again. In the end, things went from bad to worse until the great dark ages before the Reformation. And though, on the whole, you'll say the Reformation was a good thing and restored things somewhat, yet century after century has seen decline, sometimes into the most abysmal darkness.

So the same question applies. If God could raise up one Paul, why didn't he raise up a whole succession of Pauls? We could have had Christianity at the tip top like it was at the beginning, and things would have been marvellous. And you can bring it nearer to hand. In my youth, when I was beginning to preach, and sometimes it still happens, I'd be taken home after the meeting to my elegant host and hostess, and in the process of making conversation, they would say, 'Did you know D. L. Moody?' I'm not that old, even if I look it! No, I didn't know Moody, nor Stonehouse, nor the other famous preachers. 'Ah,' they say, 'tremendous men they were: what fantastic times we had. There are no preachers around like that today.' And I'm very tempted to say, 'Please tell me what went wrong, why didn't you carry on the same standard?' Why did the Lord let those great men die and hand over things to such pygmies as me? What went wrong?

Before we ask what went wrong, we could at least listen to the historian. Perhaps, after all, God never did intend to keep David alive forever, and perhaps God's own solution for maintaining his people was not even to raise up a succession of Davids. Had God any provision for his people? Could they have been maintained at the high level to which David brought them? And the answer is yes, they could have been. For Solomon, David's son, in his early days perceived what God's provision was, and said before God, 'I am but a child, and I don't know how to go out and to come in before your people. Nor have I the wisdom to lead them. Grant me your wisdom' (see 3:7). And the solution to which God guided Solomon was this—not a succession of Davids, but the building of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem city. That was the solution.



We have read from Solomon's great prayer at its dedication, in which Solomon lets us see how he perceived the glorious function of this house of the Lord that God had bidden him build in Jerusalem. It is to cure all ills, as far as Solomon is concerned. As he stands with his hands raised to God before the assembled nation, he doesn't say, 'Lord, put it in the heart of your people always to obey me.' Of course not, what sane man would! He says, 'Lord, put it into the heart of your people always to look towards this house. No matter where your people get to, for we're all a simple lot and we all come short, we are plagued in our own hearts and as a nation we go astray, we are given to perversity constantly, and we get ourselves in all kinds of trouble. But Lord, however extreme the trouble, however far the banishment, whatever the plague is upon the heart or upon the land, if your people turn and pray toward this house, then hear in heaven and forgive their sin, and in your tremendous mercy restore your people to your presence and your blessing' (see 1 Kgs 8:12-53).

For Solomon, the secret of maintaining Israel as they should be maintained, was the building of the house of the Lord at Jerusalem. We can't listen to Solomon praying like that without beginning to remember our own provision as Christians. Listen to Paul talking to Timothy. Paul is getting an aged man now, and he's soon got to hand over everything to his younger fellow worker Timothy and people like Titus and the elders of Ephesus and what have you. And he says,

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household ['house' KJV] of God. (1 Tim 3:14-15)

So, let's pause there as the number one station on our pilgrimage tonight, and ask ourselves the simple question: what exactly does the Bible mean when it refers to 'the house of God'?

## **The house of God**

The building that Solomon built for God in the ancient world is called by various names. Sometimes it is called a temple, but rarely so in 1-2 Kings. It is normally called by the term 'the house of God'. Nowadays as a Christian community, we wouldn't dream of thinking of the buildings in which we meet as a house of God or a sanctuary. The house of God is the people of God. But still the question arises, what do you mean when you refer to the people of God as the house of God, and what is the house of God anyway? We're used to the term 'church', or we're used to the term 'the flock of Christ', or 'the bride of the Lamb'. What exactly do you mean when you talk about the 'house of God' and how to behave in the house of God?

To answer that question, it would be helpful to go back to one of the earliest experiences that the saints of God had of what the house of God means. The first extended account of such a house is given us in the book of Genesis. It was Jacob the patriarch who had the vision of the house of God. Just let me remind you of that famous story (see Gen 27-28). Jacob had just swindled his brother Esau out of the blessing; and Esau, not taking it kindly, had threatened to murder him. His mother had warned Jacob and Jacob had found it convenient to leave home; and his mother had given him directions that he was to go to her

brother Laban down in the foreign land. So Jacob was leaving home for the first time to get his permanent job abroad. His head was doubtless full of schemes and what he was going to do, and where he would get to and what job he could have. Being tired out, he lay down to rest and he took a stone of the place for his pillow.

As he slept, he saw there was a ladder, not let down from heaven with the bottom almost reaching earth, but a ladder erected on earth, and the top of it was going towards heaven. The angels of God were ascending and descending on the ladder in their quiet and impressive efficiency in their thousands. And he saw God standing; and where was God standing? Well, you can have your pick of how you translate the Hebrew at this juncture. Some would say that God was standing at the top of the ladder, and the Hebrew will bear that translation. But the Hebrew would also bear the translation that God was standing at the side of the ladder, and perhaps Jacob's own comment when he woke up settles the question for us. For when Jacob woke up from this vision, he said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it' (28:16). Now, it would have been no news to Jacob to discover that God was in his heaven. Most days of the week he preferred it that God should be a long, long way off, particularly when he was putting a very hard bargain with Esau and cheating him out of this and that. It was marvellously convenient to have God a long way off in heaven. The startling thing to Jacob was that God was in this place, and he didn't know it.

How the echo comes down the centuries! How many of us would have to confess it! Even if we know the theory, when we get into our difficulties in life and we get churned up and over-burdened with care, and we suddenly wake up to the fact that we thought we knew but had forgotten: God isn't just in his heaven, God is in this place. Oh my brother, my sister, this very moment as I speak with you, God is in this place. What a wonderful thing it would be if we woke up to it. 'God is in this place and I knew it not,' said Jacob, 'surely this is the house of God.' That's what you mean by the house of God—'God is in this place.'

### **The gate of heaven**

But what for? Says Jacob, 'This is the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven' (28:17). When he used that expression, he wasn't thinking of the gate of heaven as the way in. I don't know what views Jacob had about going to heaven, but certainly he wasn't anxious to go just now. He was a young chap going out to get a job, and he wanted to get married and was looking forward to having a house of his own, a car of his own, and children of his own, before going to heaven. There are a lot of us who feel like that, aren't there? Ask if we'd like to go to heaven today, we'd say, 'Well yes, but what a mercy, I was ill, so very ill, and I nearly went to heaven, but God had mercy on me.' A funny place, heaven must be! 'God had mercy on me, so I didn't have to go to heaven after all!' And we're thinking, 'Yes, we'd love to go to heaven when we're old and worn out and can't do anything sensible, but just for the moment, there are such a lot of interesting things to do down here.' We don't necessarily want to go to heaven, and Jacob didn't anyway. So what did he mean by, 'this is the gate of heaven'?

Well, he was thinking of that other function that a gate had in an ancient city. The gate was the place where the elders sat to administer the city. Go to Israel today, to some of the ancient sites, and they'll show you the gate, which isn't just a wall with a door in it, but a big

square building, and around the wall are the seats where the elders of the city used to sit in order to administer and to govern the city. Jacob had just had revealed to him, not only that God was in this very place by his elbow, but what God was doing there. At his very elbow was the centre of the whole administration of heaven. God, as I would take it, at the bottom of the ladder, with the angelic hosts going out from the divine presence to do his work and his will, and then returning and folding their wings to await their further orders. What a spectacular thing that was.

And if tonight we could be given the same vision, would it not overwhelm us? What kind of a civil service do you imagine is necessary to maintain our universe? What kind of a civil service is necessary for the angels to minister to us who are on our way to glory, heirs of salvation? What kind of a civil service is necessary to look after the children, for the angel of the children has permanent and constant access to the immediate divine presence. 'Their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven' (Matt 18:10). 'God is in this place', and Jacob sensed he was at the very centre of the administration of heaven and earth. And he took it seriously. He said, 'God, if you're real like that and you're concerned with me, and you have given me this renewed promise that you're going to be with me and fulfil all your promises that you gave to Abraham, through me and through my succession, then if you take me out and keep me and bring me back, you'll be my God' (see Gen 28:20–21). Some people have criticized him for being so mercenary as to be concerned with his wages and his living. I think it might do us all a bit better if we were concerned to take God to our factory and our office desk; and if we wrote above our desks, or over the kitchen sink where we peel the potatoes, 'God is in this place'.

And now it begins to make sense, doesn't it? You can begin to see what Solomon saw. He had the charge of maintaining the people of God. But if this were true that the transcendent Lord really was prepared to come and 'dwell in this house which I have made' —the very centre of the vast administration of the universe—then that's all you would need for the maintenance of all the people of God. It remains so still. Many great men come, and thank God for them; and when their time arrives, the great men go. The constant is this: we are the house of God. 'And,' says Paul, 'I write so that men and women know how they ought to behave themselves in the house of God.' That isn't some legalistic description meant to bind us hand and foot. This is the glorious truth that you in your church and I in mine, wherever we are, have the living God in our midst—God in this place.

### **The details of the house**

Not only did Solomon build a house, the book of Kings gives quite a lengthy description of that house. And as a device for refreshing your memory and also keeping us awake at this late hour, you might care to turn and look at some of the descriptions that are given of this house of God. They come in 1 Kings 6, and though they are very ancient descriptions of a literal house of stone, wood, gold and silver, they will convey lessons to us.

In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the

second month, he began to build the house of the LORD. The house that King Solomon built for the LORD was sixty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. (6:1–2)

From those verses, down to verse 10, is a description of the house in terms of its basic structure. The sum of it is this: that there was to be just one house. Of course, to make it practical, there had to be many side chambers where the priests could do their work. Priests had different kinds of work. Some had to make the show bread, and some had to make the incense, and some had to look after the trumpets, and some had to look after the harps, and so on. They all had their little rooms where they were to work and do their various tasks. But while there were many side chambers, there was to be just one house. That was the structural arrangement.

Verses 11–13 are a plea for obedience, and then from verse 14 to the end of chapter 6 is the description of the interior decorations and furnishings. The ladies like this bit, for they're experts at their own interior design in their house! And of course, everybody in your church is absolutely thrilled and interested with the account of the decor of the Lord's house in 1 Kings! They constantly read it, sure they do, because what lady wouldn't be interested in people's houses and the decor and furnishings! The basic thing was this, that inside there were two parts to it: there was the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, inside which was the very throne of God. And the wonder of it was that outside there was an altar where Israel's high priest could come and, if you can take it in, he was allowed to address the living God himself, who made his presence known on top of that ark and mercy seat.

Just imagine the fantastic thing that God was saying to those ancient Israelites: that they could come and put suggestions to him who is the Lord transcendent, Lord governor of the whole universe. He allowed his little creatures of six foot of clay to come and stand before him and put their prayers, and their supplications, and their suggestions to him, and thus to share with him in his almighty government. It is still true, of course. And in those days when we really believe it, we act on it. For if when we meet in church we are the house of God, who could measure the sublime privilege of being allowed to come and put our suggestions before the almighty throne and cooperate with God in the progress of his work and in the government of his people?

### **Décor—expressions of life**

It was marvellous to be inside because of the décor. The leading motif in the decoration was palm trees and cherubim, and when you walked in, there were cherubim everywhere. It's interesting to go into people's houses and see the things they like. Some people have birds everywhere, and some have flowers, and some have modernist painters, and others go for the colonial style. In the house of the Lord, you didn't have to walk two inches in before you saw that the leading motif was all living things—trees and open flowers, and then there were these cherubim everywhere. And if you had been allowed to go into the holiest of all, there were not only a couple of cherubim on the ark, but in Solomon's house there were two mighty olive wood cherubim that stood facing you when you went in, with their wings outstretched from one wall to the middle, and from the middle to the other wall.

Cherubim everywhere, and it wasn't just to make the house look pretty. As other parts of Scripture tell us, the cherubim were the living creatures. In Revelation 4, where God's throne is seen and pictured to us, it is said to be resting on the backs of the living creatures, and they are the cherubim. For this you must know about God and his government—and here we're using the picture and metaphorical language of Scripture—his throne rests on living things. This is not a set of doctrines, this is the living God. What would you suppose the decorative motif of his house to be? Everywhere around the walls in the Holy Place and the Most Holy is expression of life. That's how he governs, ultimately. That's how God gets apples to grow on a tree: he gives the apple tree life and the life he gives it brings the apples.

And that's how he governs his people, he gives them his own life—he begets them again by his Holy Spirit—and by that very life of God within them, he governs them. The living God, known in the life of his people. And you can't visualize that tremendous decorative motif in the house of God without thinking once more of Paul's words to Timothy: 'I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the house of God, *which is the church of the living God*' (1 Tim 3:14–15). What a wonderful thing it would be if, by God's grace, we could recapture the reality. A church is not just a place where we come as an evening club. It's a place where we can know the presence of the living God and sense the vibrancy of his life.

Then look at chapter 7 and you'll see that there was another complex in the neighbouring court. That was the king's house (vv. 1–12), his own personal palace and various state rooms—the Hall of Judgment and the House of the Forest of Lebanon, and so forth. Because there was a twin unit of government in Israel—the house of the Lord with a living Lord in residence, and the king's house, who was charged to see that the people obeyed the laws of the living God.

### **Furnishings—the bronze pillars**

Finally in chapter 7, from verse 13 to the end of the chapter, there were the furnishings in the court. First there were two great bronze pillars, standing outside the porch of the house of the God. They were magnificent things to see, especially with their ornate capitals. The capital seems to have been three-tiered. At the top was lily work coming out and branching out like the tops of lilies, and then the great orb with latticework and two rows of pomegranates. These were symbols in Israel's day—the pomegranates of fruitfulness and the lilies of beauty. They were such big decorative pillars that they gave names to them: one was Jachin and the other was Boaz. So it was a very impressive thing as you came marching towards the house of the Lord and you saw the front door. I go through a lot of front doors, but you can't always judge the kind of people that live inside by what the front door is like. But if you came to the house of the Lord, you didn't slip in by some mean little back door. There were these two great pillars you were meant to go through, and the people couldn't but be amazed at their beauty and attractiveness.

## **Furnishings—the lavers**

Then in the court the special emphasis that Solomon had put there was a great laver (or ‘sea’). In Moses’ tabernacle, Moses was concerned with the big altar and the shedding of blood, because Moses was concerned about the way into God—forgiveness and redemption. But you’ll scarce read about the altar in Solomon’s house. What you will read about is this enormous laver on the backs of oxen, and then ten subsidiary lavers on wheels. You were never far away from a supply of water if you wanted some water for cleansing. But if you had a lovely big house like that, you would need to keep the thing clean, ceremonially clean, and Solomon was concerned, and so was God, to keep his house clean.

## **Lessons for us?**

Does that ancient decorative motif and ceremonial cleansing have a message for us? Yes, of course. Look again at our verses:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household [‘house’ KJV] of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (1 Tim 3:14–15)

### *Upholding the truth*

Now let’s get that clear. The church isn’t the truth. The church is simply the pillar that holds up the truth for men and women to see and to admire. Just as the pillars in Solomon’s temple are there to hold up the great capitals, so it is the task of the church of God to stand as the pillar. To hold up before the public’s view the sheer truth of God in all its beauty and in all its fruitfulness, so that men and women coming might be impressed and delighted with the truth of God. It is a function of the church, unless you think I’m now indulging in arbitrary, fanciful allegorization!

Let me remind you of what Paul says about the other apostles at Jerusalem. Paul happened to be writing an epistle on justification by faith and how the whole doctrine had been obscured by false teachers in the province of Galatia. People were teaching things contrary to the plain truth of the gospel, and saying that circumcision was necessary to salvation and other such things that would have ruined the gospel. And he says, ‘When I got to Jerusalem, I had a word with John and James, who seemed to be pillars.’ It isn’t that he went to see if they’d grown a little bit wobbly in the meantime! Some pillars can—they have that tendency to get a bit wobbly, and that won’t do if you’re meant to be holding up the truth of God’s gospel before the world. If your pillar gets wobbly, the big capital that is the truth can fall down in the mire, and get itself in disgrace. ‘I went and had a word with John and James who seemed to be pillars,’ says Paul. Yes, Christianity has the same metaphor, and in our day it is still the task of the house of God to hold up the truth of God.

### *Provision for cleansing*

What about the other thing in the court: the great laver? It offered cleansing by water. There are two types of cleansing, even for us as Christians. First John 1:7 says that ‘the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s son, cleanses us from all sin’. And blood cleanses our hearts from an evil

conscience: blood cleanses us from the guilt of sin. Then, Ephesians 5:25–26 says that ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word’. And what does water cleanse? Let me quote the verse, ‘that he might present the church to himself not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing’ (v. 27). Spots and wrinkles are things that corrupt our beauty, aren’t they?

Gentlemen, you know what happens. Suppose one of these days that your wife announces that she’s thought to do a special banquet for your dinner. And when you have enjoyed the meal, she says, ‘Oh, I meant to tell you, dear, I had a little accident with the car today. I saw Mr Smith across the road and I was leaning out and having a word with him, when a stationary lorry backed into me, and I’m afraid I’ve damaged the car.’

And you say, ‘You’ve done what? How many times have I got to tell you to look where you’re going? You mean you’ve ruined the front of my brand new Mercedes?’ But of course then you get over it, and you say, ‘Well, did you hurt yourself, my dear?’

‘No.’

‘Well then it doesn’t matter. We can get the car repaired, it’s only a bit of tin anyway. And I’ll pay it for you, you don’t have to pay.’

And then you give her a big kiss and you’ve forgiven her for the guilt of having been driving carelessly.

But if the next day when you come down to breakfast and you’re looking over the top of your newspaper you notice something on your wife’s face, and say, ‘My dear, you’ve got a nasty red mark on your cheek there. What is it, is it a boil or something?’

You don’t say, ‘Oh well, it quite disfigures you, but I forgive you.’ You don’t forgive your wife for having a boil on the cheek: they’re not things you forgive. But what you do then is to go to the doctor forthwith, so she can get rid of it, because it’s quite spoiling her beauty. So when we come to Christ, there is cleansing by blood from the guilt of sin, but in addition there needs to be the cleansing by water. That is the removal of all those ugly blotches, blemishes, wrinkles and other such things that quite positively pervert our personalities.

Paul takes up the theme, writing to his colleague Titus in Crete. He says, ‘Between you and me, Titus, the Cretans are a bad lot—evil beasts, lazy gluttons and always liars’ (Titus 1:12). Well, the dear believers have got converted, or are supposed to have been, but how would you handle an assembly where the folks were by character evil beasts and liars, and you never could rely upon them? And Paul says, ‘Well, have patience, because we were like that once upon a time.’

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy . . .

Saved how? By the blood of Christ? Well not this time, because he isn’t thinking about the guilt of sin, he’s thinking about the perversity of our characters, our tendency to be disobedient and horrible generally. He saved us,

... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour. (Titus 3:3–6)

So I have a certain sympathy in my heart with old Solomon. What would you have done if God had put you in charge of a whole nation like Israel? They could be perverse sometimes, and positively disobedient. I could understand the man, putting the emphasis not on the blood of the sacrifice, though that still was necessary, but on the washing by water. He was concerned with the natural disobedience at the heart of God's people. If we are concerned about behaving in the church of the living God, the house of God, about how men ought to behave, then we shall have to put a big emphasis there too. We shall have to have a gospel that not only can offer people forgiveness of guilt but positive regeneration, and turn disobedient sinners into obedient saints.

### **Departure and revival**

Just to complete the story, if that was God's provision for his people, I now suggest a way of looking at the story of 1–2 Kings. It seems to me the writer has a thesis. This was God's provision to maintain his people. Then what did they do with it? Well, the thesis is a simple one. When Israel lived in the good of that great provision made for them, they prospered. When they neglected it and transgressed it, they came to trouble and ultimate disaster. When in their trouble they came back to God and looked towards that house, there came revival. That's a simple message and an obvious one, but God has spent two whole books of the Old Testament conveying the message to us. Let me rapidly sketch in some of the history.

#### **Only one house**

The first set of plans said there had to be only one house—many side chambers for convenience of work and that kind of thing—but one house. There came a king over the ten tribes of Israel, his name was Jeroboam. God had given him leadership of the ten tribes, but Jeroboam became afraid in his heart that if the ten tribes continued to go up to God in Jerusalem, to the temple of the Lord there, they might eventually abandon him and go back to obeying the kings of Judah. So he said, 'I'll tell you what, that's old fashioned, going up to that Jerusalem house. The modern thing is to have two houses down here in Israel.' So, he made the 'house of God' in Bethel and another one in Dan. You can see the remains of it to this present day if you go to Dan. Whereas God had made one house and one divine headquarters, Jeroboam's sin was that he set up other headquarters and stopped the people going direct to God. That was an affront on the first and basic principle of the house of God. The basic principle of the house of God is that every believer has direct access to God. That didn't mean that the people were to disobey their king. It did mean that Israel would obey their king so long as the people themselves had direct access to God. Jeroboam came between the people and God and inserted himself and his houses. It led to disaster and the melancholy comment of the historian is that Israel never recovered from the sin of Jeroboam (see 2 Kgs 17:22).



What should that teach us? It will teach us that whatever our organization, the first basic thing to hold on to for dear life is the great gospel fact of our direct dependence upon the living God. I confess to you, I have fears in my own heart sometimes. They run like this. Why are the people coming? I hope they're not coming to wait on me, what a broken reed that would be. I hope they come to wait for and on the living God. For if ever we get our eyes off him and simply put our eyes on men or whatever, we have begun the downward slippery slope into a desert of spiritual poverty.

### **Only one pattern**

There was a fellow called Ahaz at one stage, he was a king in Judah. He was in political trouble and he went up to Damascus to meet the king of Syria. And up in Damascus, he had a look round the temples and he saw some new ideas, so he wrote a postcard home to the high priest at Jerusalem and he said, 'High Priest, sir, I've seen some new schemes for altars and things up here and I rather like the modern view. Here is a diagram, would you have one made by the time I get back?' And when he got back, they had this new altar thing, and then he had a look round and saw the laver standing on its oxen, and he had the bright idea to cut it down and put it on the ground (see 2 Kgs 16). Just imagine the impertinence of altering what God had provided. You mustn't be surprised that a few decades later, comparatively speaking, God allowed the king of Babylon to come up and he smashed the laver to bits. He smashed the pillars to pieces, and Israel went into captivity. That should serve as a warning to us, to underline that real fact of the authority of God's holy word, by which we purify our hearts by obeying the truth in love of the brethren. To demote the authority of the word of God and put it down on the ground, like many have done in our day and age, will lead to utter disaster.

### **Revival!**

But I mustn't leave you on that note. Let me remind you that there were four revivals in the course of the history. In each of them, you'll see a principle at stake. There was a revival under Elijah. What a man Elijah was. I don't think he ever went near the house of God at Jerusalem because he ministered in the ten tribes up north, but while he never went near the house at Jerusalem, he lived in the reality of it. Not just for him a matter of a few decorations on the wall of a building of flowers, and palm trees, and cherubim; he lived in the reality: he knew the living God. When the nation was sunk in its idolatry, worshiping Baal, Elijah challenged them to a contest on the top of Mount Carmel to decide who the true God was. And you remember the story (1 Kgs 18): he said to the priests of Baal, 'Build your altars and put your sacrifice on them, and then call upon Baal. I'll build my altar and I'll call upon my God. And the God that answers by fire, let him be God.'

Well, the priests of Baal built their altar, and they called upon their god, but the historian notes that there was no voice, nor any who answered, which isn't to be surprised at. Who was Baal anyway? Baal was the old pagan deification of the storm God. Baal, sometimes represented as a bull, was the deification of the principle of fertility; both of them impersonal, natural forces. But you see, by this time Israel had sunk into the same idolatry

as the other nations. Leaving the living God Creator, they had gone over to this absurdity—the idolatrous interpretation of the universe, the worship of the impersonal forces of nature.

Our modern world has done the same—atheists by the cartloads, refusing to retain the knowledge of the living God. They say they want to be free, but they have to admit that the ultimate powers that control them are not men. If there is no God, the ultimate powers that control us are the blind, impersonal forces of nature—basic energy, the weak atomic power, the strong atomic power, electromagnetism, gravity and anti-gravity, if there is such a thing. Alright, you live your forty years and the sun shines on you and you feel happy that you haven't got any God—you are an atheist. But you get yourself into trouble, and in the moment of your trouble you go and stand on the top of your mountain and you cry. You cry to gravity to help you, cry to your electromagnetism, cry to your weak and strong atomic powers, and there is nobody there to hear you. There is no God. You stand alone in the universe—the universe that is one day going to crush the very breath out of your body or destroy you by a virus or something. And when it's done it, it won't even know it's done it. Alas for our neighbours and our friends who live without God and have no hope in the world; and alas for a Christendom that's gone after its atheistic evolution. We have one theologian in my country in a certain university which will be nameless, he's a theologian and he doesn't even believe in God!

### **The witness of the church**

What is the church? It is the house of God, the church of the living God. My brothers and sisters, we have the message the world needs. How shall we get it to them? We can't content ourselves to stay within our little huddled group. We've got to get out where men are, we've got to get out where the priests of Baal are. Get to the masses that are dying without hope and show them the reality of the living God. And how would you show them that? The old priests of Baal jumped up and down on their altar and Elijah mocked them, 'You need to call a little bit louder, I think your god may have gone on holiday, perhaps, or perhaps he's gone to the toilet (Elijah was a little bit down to earth!), cry a bit louder.' But they cried and there was no voice to answer. Then Elijah put the sacrifice on the altar and doused it with barrels of water and called upon God to answer, 'the God that answers by fire, let him be God'. And the fire came down and accepted the sacrifice, and Israel knew who the true God was.

How do we know who the true God is? What's the final bit of evidence? Amidst all the religions under the sun, how would you know the true God? There is one place on earth where you may hear his voice, and it's not a sacrifice of an animal upon the altar, it's the place of Calvary, where the sacrifice was offered for humankind and God accepted the sacrifice.

With this I close. I was in Russia not so long ago, addressing a secular, state-run school at the invitation of the headmistress who had asked me to come and preach on Christianity. Afterwards the Deputy Head came up and said, 'What do you think about UFOs?'

I said, 'Well, we haven't had any our way, at least we've had a few, but the government says they're not the genuine thing, so I don't know much about them.'

She said, 'We've had a large number our way, and there was one came recently and the people inside the UFO told the local people that Buddhism is the true religion, not Christianity. What do you think of that?'

I said, 'Really it's not a problem to me. When I was in Japan recently a Buddhist lady asked me why Christians say that Jesus is the only way to God. I told her that I have no difficulty in making up my mind, because I have a practical problem. I'm a sinner, and as far as I can read, all religions tell us to try and be good and thus to earn our salvation. But my trouble is that I haven't been good, so I'm stymied before I start. What I want to know is how I can find forgiveness in a way that will uphold my own values and the values of the law, and yet be able to be forgiven without saying sin doesn't matter. So you see why I say Jesus Christ is the only saviour—because he's the only one who offers it. There is no forgiveness in Buddhism or in Hinduism. Jesus Christ is the only one who offers it. And I can tell you for sure that you'll find only one who will ever come alongside you and say, "I am your creator, you have sinned against me; you deserve the penalty of sin, and I your creator died for you that you may be forgiven." There is nobody else will ever talk to you like that. Jesus Christ is the only one.'

How do you know the true God? It was the message of the fire that came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice. It is the message of Calvary. Here speaks your living God. Rather than that you perish, he gave his son to die for you. And it was Elijah, himself in touch with the living God, who made the living God thus a reality to his contemporaries, and started the great revival that for a time brought Israel back to God.

I would, of course, have liked to have talked to you about all the other revivals. I haven't the time. Perhaps I've said enough to whet your appetite if you haven't been studying 1 and 2 Kings recently. There was the house of God, there was its provision, and the thesis of the historian is that when people used it, they prospered. When they went against it, they failed and came to disaster. When they returned once more to avail themselves of the provision God had made, it led to outstanding revival. And so it will do for us even in our advanced day.

May the Lord bless his word to all our hearts, for his name's sake.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.