

This is our third week of a 5 week journey across the terrain of the entire Bible. We're going to move from Genesis to Revelation and survey the one big story that holds this book together. Essentially there are two questions: 1) **what is the big story that holds it together?** 2) **Can I believe it?** Is it really true, and if it is really true, what difference does it make to me?

In the first week we looked at Genesis 3. We saw that Adam and Eve gave in to temptation and, as a result, their relationships with God, creation and each other were broken. In response God said that he would send someone who would rescue them.

In week 2 we saw that God honoured his promise and he sent Moses to rescue them from slavery in Egypt and he got them to the Promised Land. He gave them Laws so that they could be a light to the world of what it was like to live as the people of God. That looked quite like the end of the story, but it wasn't quite. (photo page)

Winston Churchill: Is a constant trouble to everybody and is always in some scrape or other. He cannot be trusted to behave himself anywhere.

JILLY COOPER, *novelist.*

Godolphin School, Salisbury: Jilly has set herself an extremely low standard which she has failed to maintain.

DAVID OWEN, *former joint leader of the Lib Dems.*

Mount House, headmaster's report: If I had to select an expedition to the South Pole he would be the first person I would choose. But I would make sure that he was not on the return journey!

Charlotte Bronte

“She writes indifferently and knows nothing of grammar.”

That should remind us not to judge a person too soon. But neither should we judge the story too soon. Sometimes we mistake our journey for our destination. In people's lives we sometimes write someone off and yet they are only on a journey, not at their destination. At the end of our look at Exodus a couple of weeks ago I mentioned that it would be possible to see the Promised Land as the ultimate destination of the people of God. God had called the Israelites to be his people.

He rescued them from slavery. He gave them a land. Job done, journey over. At least, that's how it might look.

This passage before us this morning actually comes years later, in Israel's golden age. It is also an age of disappointment.

This is an age of construction. On our journey through the Bible we have reached some high hills this morning. From the valley of slavery in Egypt the Israelites have travelled through the wilderness and have settled in this small plot of land called Caanan. Despite tribal differences there is essentially a family unity among them and under the first Kings they form what is essentially a United Kingdom of Israel. Today's reading happens in the time of King Solomon who had the Temple built. This is the golden age of the old Testament. Under King's David and Solomon there was a time of unity, prosperity and relative peace for the nation that they will never see again. For that reason, some critics dismiss this as a legendary age where David is relegated to a kind of King Arthur figure.

Solomon is also merely a matter of myth - but to do that plays fast and loose with the evidence. There is recent evidence in particular that brings back to history evidence for David and Solomon. Every so often I feel it's necessary to show you a picture of what appears to be a pile of stones and, I have to say that I am not in any way an expert in this area, so I'm trusting the research that I've done. This is a stone supporting structure that is now generally believed to be part of a great palace at the time of David and Solomon. Events from so long ago, from the time of David and Solomon, are hard to find direct evidence for. As the centuries pass, documents tend to disappear or disintegrate. Architecture is the most that we can hope for. You see, even King Herod at the time of Jesus, a thousand years after David, is only really known from his building work and architecture. If you visit and travel in the holy land today most of the impressive sites you see are buildings from the time of King Herod. He was a remarkable planner and architect. Apart from coins bearing his name we have no inscriptions of King Herod's name from his time but no one doubts his existence because of the evidence of his building works. But both David and Solomon have regularly been dismissed as figures of myth.

In the early 1990s there was an astonishing discovery known as the Tel Dan Stele. A stele is an upright stone that is inscribed and used as a monument of an important event or achievement. Rulers and peoples from Egypt, Israel, and across Mesopotamia used these steles to commemorate great victories and accomplishments. This particular stele is extraordinary because carved on its stone

face is the expression, “House of David.” Here we have an inscribed stone, found in the Israeli city of Dan and dated to within one hundred years of the life of King David. It not only refers to the dynasty of David but to the people of Israel. So this three thousand-year-old stone refers, in Aramaic, to the historical reality of King David.

What about King Solomon? What evidence do we have of his reign? During the 1960s some interesting evidence surfaced. At three cities a particular type of fortified gateway was found. They are called six chambered gates. A very secure system of protecting and guarding a city wall. At Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer, three cities that are mentioned by name in the Bible as having been fortified by Solomon, we find the same architecture. There is the same style of fortification. All of that indicates that at the time of Solomon there was wealth, central planning and very intelligent systems of defence. They provide a degree of evidence for the existence of Solomon.

Most famous in terms of history is the building work of the great Temple. Since the Exodus, when Israelites came out of Egypt, they have stored the Ark of the Covenant, containing the stone tablets of the law, in a portable tent called the Tabernacle. It was Solomon who created a permanent stone version of the Tabernacle, called the Temple.

Verse 6 *The priests then brought the ark of the Lord’s covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim.* It’s interesting that the basic shape and structure of the Temple, or Tabernacle, was not unique to Israel. An outer courtyard with an inner holy place and a small ‘holy of holies’ right the back, all oriented eastwards is something you find in structures outside Israel. What was unique was not the structure of the Temple itself but what lay at its heart. Instead of containing a throne for a King, or a statue to a national God, there were words, the word of God, the law of God. That was the physical object placed in the holy of holies as if to say that they were not to worship a physical statue of God but that they would worship God through his word. That’s why Jews and Christians through the years have been known as people of the book. At the heart of Christian worship is a God who speaks, a God who we know through his spoken word. And so God makes himself known through his word and yet the Israelites had a visible, tangible sense of his presence. Verse 10 *When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. 11 And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple.*

God give a physical sense of his presence in the Temple. Where have we seen that cloud before? The cloud of God's presence. It is a reminder of the cloud of God's presence that led the Israelites in the wilderness. And now that cloud is filling the Temple. It's what the Bible calls the 'glory of God'. That word glory sometimes seems such a vague word and passes over the heads. The Hebrew word glory has a sense of meaning heaviness or weight, so the glory of God is the heavy, felt weight of the presence of God amongst the people of God, and he is in the Temple. So this age of construction is a glorious age. God is present among the people and that leads us to our second point - **this is an age of construction, but also of contentment.**

When critics ask for evidence of this period it's worth noting how short lived it is. Solomon's reign, the high point of ancient Israel, lasts for about forty years. And even during that time we see that Egypt launches a military campaign into the land. So it's forty years but even they are not without trouble. So don't be fooled into imagining that this golden age is a time when Israel has no troubles, no enemies and that lasts for hundreds of years. It is a brief moment which passes very quickly in history. In the grand scheme of things it is but the blink of an eye. I think there's a reason for that which is very important and we will return to in a minute. The evidence that people would really like to see for this age is the evidence of the Temple at the time of King Solomon. Surely, of all the buildings of the Bible this is the one that we should have the clearest evidence for, and there's a problem. Primarily, this is because the temple built by Solomon was demolished and rebuilt a few hundred years later, and then extensively remodelled by King Herod at the time of Jesus, and then demolished by the Romans who built their own little Temple, which was then demolished and when Islam arrived they built their own monument, now known as the Temple Mount. All of that makes archaeology very difficult as it is now a Muslim holy site. There is an ongoing project called the Temple Mount sifting project because the religious authorities who manage the Golden Dome brought in large earth-movers, dug out some rubble, replaced pipes and upgraded electrics and dumped the rubble into the Kidron Valley nearby. So, an archaeological team have been working on sifting through the debris to discover every little fragment of stone, marble, tile or weapon despite the fact that it's very difficult to understand because it's all been muddled up.

So will never really know about the Temple at the time of Solomon but, VV14-15 *While the whole assembly of Israel was standing there, the king turned around and blessed them. 15 Then he said: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who with his own hand has fulfilled what he promised with his own mouth to my father David.*

You see, the Temple was the physical representation of God's faithfulness to his word. God had promised the Temple and he fulfilled his promise. God promised to live among his people and God fulfilled his promise. God is true to his promises and his word is always as good as his deed. In creation, God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. God said the Egyptians would be destroyed crossing the sea and they were destroyed. God said that Israel would have a land and that he would dwell among them and he came to the Temple.

So this section of Bible history, this age of contentment, at one level is about the fulfilment of God's promises.

1 Kings 4:25 *During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree.*

God now has a people of his own, in a land they can call their own, with prosperity and relative security. They are under God's rule and they know his presence. Just as God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve, now God, in the cloud of his glory, lives in the Temple in the midst of his people. So no wonder Solomon can use the words of verse 20 in his prayer: "*The Lord has kept the promise he made: I have succeeded David my father and now I sit on the throne of Israel, just as the Lord promised, and I have built the temple for the Name of the Lord, the God of Israel.*"

It seems to me that the Bible could stop there. This is the place where people can have their sin forgiven, can know they are in right relationship with God. They have the Temple. They know that their sacrifices can be offered and their sins be covered as they come before a holy God. Surely this is where the Bible could stop. This is the Golden age – the ideal time to be living in Israel. However, the age of **construction** and **contentment** is also **an age of compromise**.

Because of the nature of the vote last week there was very little in the way of compromise – it was us v them and if you were one of 'them' you were the enemy. Superficial judgements are not helpful- people voted different ways for different reasons. Not all leave voters are racist or xenophobic and not all remain voters are 20 something, wine loving, sauerkraut munching travellers. What is going on in this Golden age for Israel? Are things all that they appear to be? Notice something else in Solomon's prayer in v 27 "*But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*" Or, as the Message puts it, "Can it be that God will actually move into our neighbourhood?" Now it is Solomon's turn to ask that 'really' question that we've

thought about the last two parts of this series. Can God *really* dwell on earth? It's a good question to ask. We know that God demonstrated his presence in the Temple – the felt sense of his glory. But he didn't literally live there. God fills all of space and he cannot literally be limited by a Temple. But I think there's more behind the question than that.

This is not simply a question of physical space. There's a lot going on in this Golden Age that I haven't told you about. I haven't told you that Solomon marries many wives and keeps many mistresses. I haven't told you that they led him to worship other gods. I haven't told you that after his death the nation will break in two and that the northern kingdom will set up all sorts of false places of worship. I haven't told you that that northern kingdom will eventually be destroyed and wiped out; that the small southern kingdom will set up alliances with pagan nations that will lead them astray; that the Ark of the Covenant will literally vanish altogether; that the remaining people who get the nickname Jews, short for Judah their tribe, will be taken away into captivity.

300 years after Solomon a prophet, a visionary, in Israel will see something very dramatic take place. Ezekiel 10:18 *Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim.* It is true that a remnant will return and a second temple will be built but it is nothing compared to the Temple of Solomon. The Jews will never again, in biblical history, be an independent nation. In the ancient world they will be ruled by the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Can God really dwell in a Temple asks Solomon. No not really. You see if there is something this Golden Age of Solomon clearly reveals it is that we have a problem not solved by the Temple of stone.

What is our greatest need? Freedom from slavery – the Israelites got that in the Exodus, but they remain enslaved to their passions. A land of your own – the Israelites got that and look at it today. What about the needs that Solomon had met – material wealth, wisdom, song writing ability, buildings; Solomon had all of these. He had wives and mistresses. Do you think your greatest need today is a sexual partner? Is your greatest need today a religion and a temple of stone? Do you think your greatest need is for your career to be furthered so that you can be comfortable? We have climbed hills today to the Golden Age of Israel – and it is a false summit. If you are on a quest for happiness you need to set your sights higher. None of these things without Jesus are going to answer your deepest need. None of these things are going to address the problem of our broken relationship

with God. Without Christ they do not satisfy. Without Christ they don't bring inner transformation. Without Christ they don't bring complete forgiveness. Solomon proved it – Matt 6: 28 *“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Don't seek money as the most important thing in your life. Don't seek religion hoping that it will address your deepest need. Don't seek position in the church or rely on church attending. Seek Christ. Seek first the kingdom of God – that right relationship with God where our sin is forgiven. Seek what was lost in Genesis 3 - relationship with God – deep personal, intimate relationship with God. It's where you belong. You belong in that right relationship with God and without Christ all those other things are as nothing. But with Christ we have our security, our hope and everything we need.

So from this false summit we can glimpse the real peak. The real peak is another mountain top not capped by a Temple of stone, but capped by a cross. Next week we think about how Jesus fits in to the one big story.