

## **“The One Place About Every Place”**

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

*Fourth in a series on King Solomon*

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 8 (selected verses)

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*Please read the Scripture by clicking here: [1<sup>st</sup> Kings 8:2-3, 6, 10-13, 22-24, 27-30](#).*

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It was an April morning in 1961. The engines of the Vostok rocket shook the earth and tore the sky. Sealed atop in a tiny sphere, Yuri Gagarin hurled into history, the first person to leave the earth's embrace and dip his toes into the expanse of space.

While he was up there, Gagarin did not see God.

It was Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, who announced it. *“Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any god there.”*<sup>1</sup> Communism's official atheism was vindicated!

Silly! No one of serious religious belief, including Gagarin himself, had expected anything different. God living in the sky, floating outside the atmosphere? What a puny notion of God!

Everything occupies space, a little or a lot. Everything has a location, a place where it is (and so many more places where it is not). But God is God! God is not like anything. God is not somewhere. God is everywhere. Actually, God is beyond any sense of “where.”

You're not going to bump into God in a spacecraft. Or a shopping mall.

But what about a sanctuary? A place of worship? What about King Solomon? Yes, *wise* King Solomon? Standing at the front of the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Solomon seemed quite sure that God was now dwelling deep within God's new House. God had moved in. God had an address.

Really, Solomon? Forget Khrushchev! How silly is this!

II

What was Solomon up to?

Was Solomon trying to claim the Lord? He was doing what kings did. Along with palaces, armies, statues and empires, they built temples for their gods. Which god's protection did

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<sup>1</sup> This comment has often been attributed to Gagarin himself, but he did not say it. Apparently he was a faithful Christian believer his whole life. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuri\\_Gagarin#Vostok\\_1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuri_Gagarin#Vostok_1)

they want to guarantee? Which god's support did they want to secure? Which god's power would pump up their own prestige? The best thing to do would be to build that god a temple!<sup>2</sup>

Was Solomon claiming the Lord as his own? As if that could work! God is God! Silly.

Was Solomon trying to tie God to one place?<sup>3</sup> The Lord has a tendency to show up when unexpected, or inconvenient. The Lord seems absent when most desired, or needed. Other kings could create statues of their gods, images fixed and stable. When they wanted to find their gods, they knew where to go. Their gods stayed put. But for the Lord's People, this was not an option. You've heard of the Ten Commandments. Number two . . . no images of God. No idols whatsoever. But maybe a Temple will do the trick. Entice the Lord with some fancy digs. Maybe God would then stay put.

Was Solomon tying the Lord to one place? As if that could work! God is God! Silly.

Was Solomon trying to house the Lord? Just look at how the thing was designed. We call it a "temple," but the Hebrew word simply means "house," *bayit*. I have a *bayit*, you have a *bayit*, the king has a *bayit*. Let's give the Lord a *bayit* too. Not like my *bayit* or your *bayit*. The Lord's will be very, very nice. Like the king's *bayit*. Even the floor plan was domestic, in a palace sort-of-way. You had the front room for receiving guests (in this case, offerings), the middle room for servants to work (in this case, priests), and the inner room for the royal family only (in this case, the most sacred space was only for God).<sup>4</sup>

Was Solomon trying to house God? As if that could work! God is God! Silly.

### III

No. Solomon was not silly. He was wise.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Goldingay, Old Testament Theology Volume 1: Israel's Gospel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 564.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 563.

<sup>4</sup> "The basic shape corresponds to that of many Canaanite sanctuaries and royal palaces. That's partly because it follows the logic of any house, or in particular of a palace. There is a public area where people are welcome into the king's presence, the equivalent of a yard or a lounge; there is the hall where the king would meet his staff; and there are the king's private quarters." John Goldingay, 1 & 2 Kings for Everyone (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 27.

<sup>5</sup> We who like to think of ourselves as modern, often look down on the ancients. We scoff at their "backward," "primitive," and "unsophisticated" notions. It's an arrogance that afflicts us. Renowned documentary film maker Ken Burns said, "The great arrogance of the present is to forget the intelligence of the past." Interview by Bernard A. Weisberger in American Heritage 41.6 (September/October 1990). [www.americanheritage.com/great-arrogance-present-forget-intelligence-past](http://www.americanheritage.com/great-arrogance-present-forget-intelligence-past)

Even as he is dedicating this Temple, his masterpiece . . . even as he is turning over the keys to God, so to speak — “*I have indeed built You a lofty House as a place where You can live forever*” — even then, Solomon knows. He says so.

*But how could God possibly live on earth?  
If heaven, even the highest heaven, can't contain You,  
how can this House that I've built contain You?*

Solomon gets it.<sup>6</sup> It's the paradox of God's Presence. A paradox is two things, two truths, two ideas that don't fit together, yet belong together, and work together.

God is fully everywhere, and beyond every-where. And, God is right here.

God is at everyplace. And, God is at this place.

God is not physical. And, God is at home in this physical creation which God makes.

God is always present. And, our experience of God's Presence comes and goes, is here and not here. God's Presence is a gift given and a gift withheld. God's Presence is comforting and frightening. We come to God, and we run away from God, and God is always present.

God's Presence filled the Temple, as solid as a cloud that pushed everyone out. Was that God? Yes, and no. Had God moved into the place? No, and yes. Would God stay there? Yes, and no. Does this make any sense? No, and yes.

#### IV

How is God present with you? With us? Everywhere, and right here? All the time, and right now?

When it came to knowing God's Presence, did the Temple matter? Yes, and no. What about this place? Or any particular place? No, and yes.

Particular places do matter. God's Temple proclaimed: Here you meet God! The Presence Divine reaches out for you, draws you, welcomes you. That's what holy places do. They proclaim for us: God is here! They are meeting places for God with us.

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<sup>6</sup> John Goldingay unfolds Solomon's understanding, first in Israel's Gospel, 570 and then in 1 & 2 Kings for Everyone, 35-36.

We need them, because we are not God. God is everywhere, but we are not. We are here. You are where you are right now, and no where else. So you can only be in God's Presence here. God can only meet you here. . . . for now.

Saying, "God is everywhere" is true. Of course it is. But it is nebulous and vague, unless we realize that God is right here, right now, with you and me. Particular places, like the Temple and like this place, ground our realization of God's Presence. Yes, they matter.

V

And, no.

The Temple is long-gone. Is God any less present?

Remember that Pentecost morning. Like howling winds, like flames of fire, God the Holy Spirit filled Jesus' disciples. It happened in a particular place.<sup>7</sup> Then what happened? The Spirit sent them into the streets, through the city, to many, many places. Was God less present with them in those places than in that room where it started? No.

God gives you the gift of knowing God's Presence in one place, so you can know God's Presence in other places, in every place you go. That one place matters because all those places matter.

Remember Solomon prayed:

*If heaven, even the highest heaven, can't contain You,  
how can this House that I've built contain You?*

Of course, it could not. Still, God was there.

Every place you go, God will be there. With you.

Praise God! Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Ancient tradition identifies the "upper room" with a particular location in Jerusalem. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cenacle>.