

A House for the Lord

In the name of him whose kingdom will never end, dear friends in Christ: The Lord had been good to David. Very good indeed. He had started out as the eighth son of a moderately successful farmer, which means that his chief prospect would have been to one day inherit a paltry ninth share of his father's estate on which he might have been able to scratch out a meager living. As a boy in his wildest dreams he could never have imagined the victories, achievements, wealth, and honors the Lord planned to heap upon him. Oh, they didn't come all at once; that's for sure. Life was a rollercoaster of ups and downs for David. He experienced extended periods of hardship and great peril. He knew what it was to suffer and to be cold, hungry, tired, and afraid for his life for days on end. But those low points in his life made him appreciate all the more the success and stability he had now been granted – and not only for himself, but for the entire nation over which he came to rule by God's grace. Here he was: the shepherd boy turned king. And things were really shaping up. The nation was prosperous, its people united, and the enemies all around that had oppressed, robbed, and made lives miserable for Israel for nearly a century were conquered. Now they were paying annual tribute to Israel. The dawn of Israel's golden age had come. And the Lord used David to bring it about – and made him rich and famous in the process. In his heart David was deeply grateful for everything the Lord had done for him.

So now he wanted to say “thank you” to the Lord not just in words; but in a very tangible way. He wanted to do some noble work that would please the Lord. And it wasn't very hard for him to figure out what to do. The Tabernacle, the tent that had served as the Lord's mobile temple during Israel's wilderness wandering phase and which had been set up permanently at a place called Shiloh ever since the conquest of Canaan, was now about four hundred years old. No doubt it looked every bit its age. And now too, it had been abandoned and neglected for some twenty or so years because King Saul, David's predecessor, in one of his many fits of blind rage, had slaughtered the priests of God who served there. The sole survivor of the massacre, a priest named Abiathar, fled to the then outlaw David for protection – and with him he brought Israel's most sacred object: the Ark of the Covenant. This was the gold covered chest that contained God's Word written on tables of stone by the Lord's finger at Sinai. The Ark served as the focal point of the Lord's presence among his people. And now it sat inside a temporary shelter that had been set up for it in the Judean city of Hebron.

David decided that it was high time the Lord and his Ark had a proper home. He wanted to build a temple for the Lord made of solid stone and cedar. David had only recently made Jerusalem his capital city. Here he had built for himself a magnificent palace from which to rule. Now he would bring the Ark here and build an even more magnificent house – a house in which the Lord himself would dwell among his people. This, he thought, was the way to repay the Lord for all his kindness both to him and to the nation of Israel.

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced it was the right thing to do. I mean, how can you go wrong building a house dedicated to the worship of God? He was sure he was on the right track; but just to be *absolutely certain* he summoned the prophet Nathan. Nathan was known to be a straight shooter when it came to speaking the Word of the Lord. He always said it like it is. If there were anything wrong with what David had in mind, he would tell him so. But when David floated his idea before the prophet, Nathan was the first one to jump on board. He too was certain that it was a perfect plan. The Lord would surely be pleased.

In fact, Nathan was so sure of it that he didn't even bother to ask the Lord about it. After all, what's the point in asking if you already know the answer? Right?

Wrong. No, it's worse than just wrong. It is the height of impudence to imagine that you know what the Lord thinks about something about which he has not spoken. It doesn't matter how good your intentions are. There's a reason why they say that the road to hell is paved with them. It is. Every false religion has at its heart some human conceived notion about what it is that will please God (or whatever it is they consider to be God). And these ideas always appear to be good and noble and honorable. They appeal to what is best in the heart and mind of man—but that's exactly the problem. The Lord declares throughout the Scripture that there is nothing good in the heart and mind of man. Since the fall all we do is sin. Even our best and proudest achievements are sin. And when we present them to the Lord thinking that we're pleasing him by doing so, we add to our sins the presumption of making his judgments for him – effectively declaring ourselves to be above him, and making him the needy recipient of our kind and gracious favor.

And I have to tell you that this can be so very subtle that it easily escapes our notice. It's what lies behind the "praise service mentality" that infects so much of so-called "Evangelical" Christianity and that sadly has crept some Lutheran churches. It's the false notion that we fallen sinners can devise on our own ways to please the Lord and follow through with them to his divine satisfaction. It's the idea that we come into the presence of the Lord primarily to give him something, namely our heartfelt praise, rather than receive from him the gifts of his grace in Christ Jesus. It's the same deception that drove so many to join monasteries and convents in the middle ages. It's what led people on pilgrimages and crusades. It's candy coated poison for the soul. And the fact that even the faithful prophet Nathan was taken in by it should prove to us just how dangerous and deceptive it is.

The prophet needed to be reminded of how things actually stood. And the Lord coming to him at night to set him straight is a bit of a backhand swipe at him. It's meant to humble and correct him. In his going back to David he's going to have to eat some crow while he explains that he spoke out of turn and presumed to know the mind of the Lord.

And the message he has for David is clear. It could be summarized this way: "David, your thinking about this is all wrong. I, the Lord, do not want or need your favors. When all is said and done, there is nothing you can do for or give to me anyway. Remember the story of your life. You were an insignificant shepherd boy. *I chose you* to be the king for my people. *I* lifted you up and made you strong. *I* have been giving you victories over your enemies and making you famous. This is the way this relationship works: you hold open your hand and receive what I give to you. That's what it means to have me as your God. You look to me in faith with the expectation that I will give to you all that you need and ultimately more than you can hope for."

And that's something else that we see in this story: just how limited is the imagination of man. David thought that as a way to say thanks or return a favor he could build a house for the Lord. He was thinking that a temple made of stone and cedar would fit the bill quite nicely, especially if he spent a lot of money on it and put the best architects and craftsmen on the job. He was thinking as big as he could; but he was thinking way too small.

The prophet was instructed to tell David that there was indeed a building project in progress; but it was on an infinitely grander scale. It had to be, for the builder was the Lord himself. And he was building up a house for David, not of lifeless construction materials; but of

warm flesh and blood. It was a house not in the sense of an earthly building; but in the sense of a *family* – as in what Joshua meant when he said, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” The Lord was building for David a royal family consisting of millions of people who would live forever in peace and security.

Part of that family was the unbroken chain of men and women – the literal blood descendants of David – through whom the Lord passed down through the generations the lineage that ultimately led to the birth of his Son in human flesh. We heard about the fulfillment of *that* in today’s Gospel reading when the virgin Mary received notification of her having been chosen for the special honor of bearing God’s Son. And it’s quite interesting when you think about it: she who is already a part of the house of David (the family, that is,) is now made a “house for the Lord” because in her the Lord really does take up residence. Her body becomes the temple where the Lord dwells on earth while he grows and develops inside her. It’s important to see too that she doesn’t take this honor upon herself. It’s not her idea. It’s not something she cooks up as a way to please God. No, this task is what *the Lord* has chosen, called, and equipped her to do. All she does is receive the gift by saying, “I am the Lord’s servant; let it be to me according to your Word.” She opens the hand of faith to receive the gift of being the mother of Christ just as a thousand years earlier David received the gift of being king. That’s how true gratitude to the Lord ought properly to be expressed in the house of David: in simply receiving the gifts the Lord freely gives and faithfully discharging the tasks that he assigns.

This applies to us as well, for the house of David that the Lord is building includes not just his descendants by natural birth, but on that much grander scale I’ve been talking about, it includes all those who are born into the house by supernatural birth – that is, those who by God’s Holy Spirit are adopted into David’s family by faith in great King David’s greater Son, Jesus Christ the Lord. He too had a supernatural birth into the family; and as a member of the family, he too was called and equipped to perform a special task for the Lord. Namely, he came to offer his life as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world. Being without sin himself, he’s the only one who could do it; but I’ll have you see that even he who was perfect did not think it up or take the task upon himself. He did what he was chosen and called to do. Like his human mother he said, “I am the Lord’s servant; let it be to me according to your Word.” That’s the proper attitude of faith and thankfulness to the Lord for all he gives.

This informs us today. David, Mary, and yes, Jesus – they all had their parts to play in building the house of David in which the Lord dwells. By faith in Jesus we are part of this house. And though we sometimes speak of this building as the house of God, the true house is the family of the faithful who gather here to receive God’s gifts of grace and forgiveness, and also to hear what he would have us do to serve the family. We say our thanks to God not by imagining what we might do to please him; but by hearing his Word, trusting his promises, and acting on the things he’s equipped and assigned us to do. Because God does not need our help our favors or our contributions; but other people do – both the current members of the family and those who have yet to receive the gift of faith. You see, the house is still very much under construction – as indeed is each one of us. And what we will be and what the house will become one day far surpasses anything we can imagine.

The Lord is very good to us indeed. Let us make it a point then to express our gratitude by opening our hands to receive ever more of what he freely gives, so that by these gifts we may fulfill the role he has for us in building up his house. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!