

Chapter 2: Worship | The Temple Steps

A thousand years prior to Jesus' first coming, his ancestor David sat atop Israel's throne in the heart of Jerusalem. David's resume boasts of fidelity to the God who called him from the lonely grazing pastures just outside Bethlehem to his remarkable work of unifying the northern and southern tribes of Israel under one God and one king.

But David was not perfect. His words in Psalm 51 were birthed out of real failure,

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned. (Psalm 51:3-4)

David's reign ends like reckless smudge on priceless work of art. Following the king's sin of census counting, a three-day plague roared across Israel, claiming 70,000 men and throwing the Davidic kingdom into upheaval. On the third day, an angel stood poised to lay waste to Jerusalem when suddenly,

The Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, "It is enough; now stay your hand" (2 Samuel 24:16)

And God came that day to David and said to him, "Go up, raise an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." So David went up at God's word, as the LORD commanded... David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel. (2 Samuel 24:18-19, 24-25)

Araunah's threshing floor marked the site where the Lord relented, the very place where broken humanity met the full force of God's grace. The LORD spoke into the impending doom, "It is enough."

Threshing floors are scattered across hilltops throughout Israel. While olives were Israel's most common cash crop, grain (in places fertile and flat enough cultivate it) was equally important.

The harvesting process began as field workers cut wheat and barley with a sickle. The grain was tied into sheaves, placed atop a donkey, and brought to a threshing floor.

At the threshing floor grain was spread out atop exposed limestone. A threshing sledge was then attached to an ox or donkey which was led, pulling the sledge, around the threshing floor until the grain kernels were separated from their husks (or chaff). Following the threshing, a pitchfork was used to toss the kernel/chaff mixture into the air.

Threshing floors were generally built on high places where wind served as the means by which kernels and chaff were separated. Since kernels are smaller and more dense, they were unaffected by the wind and fell harmlessly to the limestone floor. The chaff, however, was caught by the wind and carried over the rock walls that encircle the threshing floor.

Araunah's threshing floor, the place where God spared the inhabitants of Jerusalem with His piercing words, "It is enough," became the resting point for God's name and the foundation of Solomon's Temple.

The living God chose to meet Israel on a threshing floor. But why?

From the base of the Mount of Olives, the Temple Mount looms overhead like a set of golden fangs, daring would-be worshipers to approach with trembling hearts in hand. The inhabitants of ancient Jerusalem lived on what is now the southern edge of the city (a short hike southwest from the Garden of Gethsemane) in a location the Bible refers to as "The City of David." This early colony of Israelites found itself dwelling hundreds of feet below Araunah's threshing floor, and after it was built, the Temple.

It is with trepidation that one meanders through the City of David, around the base of Jerusalem's southern walls, and up the Temple steps.

The prophet Jeremiah's words provide potent imagery related to God and humanity meeting for judgment atop the threshing floor,

I have winnowed them with a winnowing fork in the gates of the land; I have bereaved them; I have destroyed them my people; they did not turn from their ways. (Jeremiah 15:7)

The Israelites likely felt the increasing weight of God's glory as they ascended. One could not simply walk up and worship. This was too sacred of a journey, encompassing every thought, bringing to light every sin, and eliciting an onslaught of goose bumps across shivering skin.

Grain or chaff? What will our lives amount to?

This is the question that haunts even the most cavalier of humanity's sojourners. Every human being will face divine judgment. We will all meet our fiery-eyed, pitchfork-toting God.

John the Baptizer, in pointing to Jesus, reminds us:

‘His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. (Luke 3:17-18)

When it's all said and done and our lives are cut, bound, and thrown atop the threshing floor there are only two types of lives: lives of grain and lives of chaff.

Of course, the question remains: Who is this God that awaits our arrival, standing ready to judge?

Psalms 120-134 comprise a sort of liturgy the Israelite community used to prepare their hearts to meet God atop the threshing floor. The Psalms of Ascent are rooted in the geography of Jerusalem, pointing the trembling heart of the pilgrim to reflect on the fact that simple things like rocks, hills, water, and shade direct us toward the One who waits atop the threshing floor.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come from? (Psalm 121:1)

The Mount of Olives towers off to my left as I trace a line along the Kidron Valley south until it collides with the Hinnom Valley. The two trenches function like a springtime pipeline, carrying rainwater into the Dead Sea fourteen miles east and 3,000 feet below where I stand. As I squint into mid-morning sun I am barely able to make out the shadow of the Transjordan Mountains where Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites stare back at me, an unmoving reminder of Jerusalem's vulnerability. Who will unfurl the tide of impending attack and push it back into the desert sands?

My help comes from the LORD who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:2)

Sunday mornings have a way of becoming predictable: a few songs, a sermon, a couple of donut holes and some handshakes. We talk about the weather, the playoff prospects of our favorite football team, jobs frustrations, and vacation plans.

When was the last time you trembled as you crossed the threshold of your suburban sanctuary? Do you feel a sense of dread as you turn your sedan into the parking lot?

What do we expect to experience when we reach the threshing floor? The God of a mundane mental ascent? An hour invested in catchy songs and three-point sermons?

After David's death, his son Solomon constructed the Temple as a glittering testimony to Israel's emergence as a regional force. When the Temple was completed, a commissioning of sorts took place atop the former threshing floor.

After the king closed with a prayer something happened,

As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down from and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever. (2 Chronicles 7:1-3)

What would it have been like to participate in these ancient worship gatherings? Imagine the conversations that accompanied Israel's ascent from the City of David up to the Temple (remember, threshing floors were established at the high points of cities).

Raised hands. Cold sweats. Stuttering praises to the One who created everything.

Perhaps they whispered to one another as they ascended, "Did you hear about what happened on Mount Carmel? No? Well, let me tell you about how God dropped fire out of the clear blue sky. Maybe He'll do it again today!"¹

Or

"Were there angels flying behind Jehu's when his chariot poured over the hills of Gilead? I'm pretty sure I saw them! Look, there they are, hovering above the Temple right now!"²

Of course, the Temple no longer stands in the heart of the Holy City. For over 1,300 years, the Al-Aqsa Mosque has whispered a silent reminder from atop Araunah's threshing floor of the staggering truth that the presence of God now dwells in the center of the hearts of those who cling to Christ.

God is no longer found in temples. The same place that shook with His glory, as we trust in Christ, abides in us.

Araunah's threshing floor and the winnowing work of God now takes place atop our stony hearts: in Western Europe, East Texas, wherever our feet take us.

Standing atop Araunah's threshing floor is an eerie sensation. I stare out over the City of David before bending down to press my ear against the cold, pale limestone of the Temple steps. Like a child playing on train tracks I'm listening for a fast-approaching locomotive: a violent and angry god who wields a winnowing fork like a sword atop a wind-whipped threshing floor.

Instead I hear the song of Golgotha. Its chorus resounds through the ancient stones:

"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"

"My God my God, why have you forsaken me?"³

Above me a curtain is torn⁴ and I'm reminded that the wind that separates grain from chaff, saved from lost, is the Gospel itself. This is no arbitrary breeze, but rather the same Spirit that opened the tombs and filled the upper room.⁵ This is the same Spirit which, through the finished work of Jesus on the cross, fills the center of my chest with the same undiluted glory as was present in the heart of the Holy of Holies.

The City of David is quiet beneath my feet. Tour groups file in and out, up and down crumbling steps that long ago lifted emboldened hearts towards the manifest glory of God that resided in the inner sanctum of the Temple. I watch patiently as the fleeting daylight hastily drives another group of pilgrims to the "X" on their maps.

¹ 1 Kings 18

² 2 Kings 9

³ Matthew 29:46

⁴ Matthew 29:51

⁵ Matthew 29:52 & Acts 2:2-4

I'm content to remain here; alone, staring out over the city and sighing amid the realization that I could be transported to any point atop our spinning globe and find myself, spiritually speaking, in the exact same place.

I am carried by grace all the way up these steps, busting through bricked gates of the Temple Mount like light piercing darkness. Grace grips me, and while I'm still shivering in unbelief, grace throws me headlong into the Holy of Holies. My cold heart is warmed and wrapped in flesh the moment the fire falls from heaven and consumes this broken sacrifice. I am reborn.

The City of David is quiet beneath my feet with the Temple aflame behind me, warming my back. I am safe here, atop the threshing floor of God's unfailing love.