

## Heartburn

*Sermon by Bob Arbogast*

*Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan*

*August 26 & 27, 2019*

**Scripture: 1 Kings 8:22-30**

### Sermon

A few years back, I spent the day at a race track in Norwalk, Ohio. I went with my friend Ed. He told me I had to experience the roar and the thunder of real drag races. It was all new to me, and I was looking forward to it. But I'll be honest: I was nervous, too.

You see, when I was a kid I had one of those COX dune buggies. It was just a toy. But it had an engine in it, an engine that ran on a mixture of nitro-methane and methanol: dragster fuel. I never could get that thing to run for more than a few seconds. And that's probably just as well. Because it was so loud, and it sounded so out of control, that it scared me. I was just a kid.

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As a grown man, I wasn't so sure about drag race day in Norwalk. I wasn't so sure about the roar and the thunder. I wanted to hear the roar—through earplugs. And I wanted to feel the thunder. But I was scared, too. I was afraid of a car, or even just an engine, getting out of control. So I was glad to see fences and other barriers. Whether you're a kid or a grown man, sometimes it's better all around to keep your distance.

SOLOMON'S TEMPLE, ON THE OTHER HAND, BRIDGES A DISTANCE. Solomon's Temple closes the gap between God and his people. Now, if you're looking for God, he's as close as the Temple itself. And now, if you have a prayer to offer, you can aim it toward the Temple. What a great system!

But Solomon himself has his doubts. He sees the cloud of God's presence filling up the Temple and pushing the priests outside. And he recognizes the improbability of it all, the impossibility of it all. He says, "Will God really live on earth? Will God really live in this Temple? Heaven itself doesn't have enough room for God!"

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So Solomon has his doubts. And when he imagines people praying toward the Temple, he asks God to hear, not from the Temple, but from heaven. He says, "When we

pray, hear us from heaven, where you live." So despite the bridge, Solomon keeps God at a distance. Sometimes that's better all around.

YOU SEE, SOLOMON IS WISE. He's wise enough to know the danger when a dragster is out of control. He's also wise enough to know the danger when God is too close. Solomon has pondered the mystery of the burning bush. You probably know that story.

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Moses is in the Land of Midian, living there as a shepherd. One day he sees a strange sight: a bush is on fire, but it doesn't burn up. When he goes to get a closer look, he finds out he's on holy ground, he finds out he's gotten close to God. Moses falls on his face, and God begins a conversation with him. It's the conversation that will save Israel from slavery in Egypt.

The conversation is the point. The Exodus from Egypt is the point. God's faithfulness is the point. But there's still the bush. There's still the fire. And it's a mystery. How is it that the bush can be on fire but not be burned up.

WE HAD A FIRE ONE NIGHT LAST WEEK. Our daughter was visiting with some friends. So we sat in chairs around the fire ring. And I kept adding wood to the fire. Because a fire always burns up the wood. Fire always reduces wood to ash.

But the bush Moses saw . . . The bush burned, and the wood was not consumed. The bush burned, and there was no pile of ashes. It was a mystery, a puzzle in itself. But more than anything, it was a sign of another mystery, another mystery that would unfold throughout the rest of the Old Testament story.

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It's a question really: How can a holy God, a God who is a consuming fire of holiness, how can that God live in the midst of his people, a people who are anything but holy, and how can the people not be consumed by the fire? In other words, how can God's holy presence not reduce his people to ashes?

IF YOU KNOW THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY, then you know how fire broke out against Israel again and again. You know how Moses stood in the way and said, No! And you know how God made promises that were designed to restrain the fire. You also know how the fire in God's heart burned with passion and with love for his people, yet they turned away.

So the question remained. The fire remained. And the burning remained. Nowhere was the burning more severe than in God's own heart. God ached for his people. God wanted to be with his people. God wanted to remove the distance. But the distance remained. It had to remain. Because sometimes it's better all around to keep your distance.

"WILL GOD REALLY LIVE ON EARTH?" That was the question. And the answer was "No." And the answer would continue to be "No." Until the answer became "Yes."

"Will God really live on earth?" The answer to that question is not the house that Solomon built for God. No, the answer to that question is the house that God built for Solomon's father David. "You will always have a son on the throne." That was God's promise to David. But David never dreamed that a son of his would be the Son of God.

"Will God really live on earth?" The answer to Solomon's question was not the Temple. No, the answer to Solomon's question was the Incarnation. The living Word, the Word that was with God, the Word that was God, that Word became flesh and lived among us, filled to overflowing with glory. And his name was Jesus. And he was, and he is, greater than the Temple.

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The cloud in Solomon's Temple was a sign of God's presence, a presence the Temple itself could never contain, a presence the Temple could only hint at. But God is fully present in Jesus. All the fullness of God dwells in Jesus. Jesus may not be present on the earth now in his own flesh. But he is present by the Spirit. And through the Spirit, God is not far from any one of us.

BUT WAIT A MINUTE. That brings back the mystery, doesn't it? That brings back the old burning question, doesn't it? How can a holy God live in the midst of an unholy people and the people not be consumed by the fire of God's holiness? In other words, how can we not be consumed? How can we not be reduced to ash? I mean, who of us is holy?

Who of us is holy? None of us. Not in ourselves. We all know what we've done. We all know what we do. We know the major crimes. We know the petty squabbles. But we're not going to dwell there, because God doesn't dwell there.

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You see, we don't stand in God's presence by ourselves. And we don't even stand in God's presence as ourselves. No, we stand in God's presence with each other. We stand

in God's presence with Jesus. And we stand in God's presence as the church that God loves, as the church that the Spirit gathers, as the church that Jesus saves. And here's where holiness comes in: we stand in God's presence as a people who have been made holy by the grace of forgiveness—a people who have been made holy by the grace of forgiveness.

DID YOU NOTICE THAT IN SOLOMON'S PRAYER? Did you notice forgiveness? He says, "Lord, whatever we pray, hear us and forgive." He doesn't say, "Answer our requests." He just says, "Forgive." And that's important. That's foundational. Because forgiveness is the beginning of holiness. Forgiveness is where our holiness begins. God forgives us through Jesus Christ, and we become holy in him. And God is as close to us as the Spirit who lives in us.

Is there still danger? Does the fire still break out? Sure. Fire breaks out on the cross. But the wood of the cross is not burned up. Only Jesus is. And while the fire burns him, he stretches out his arms, he gathers us in, he covers us up, he keeps us safe.

SOMETIMES IT'S BETTER ALL AROUND TO KEEP YOUR DISTANCE. That's especially true when it comes to dragsters and when it comes to fire. Sometimes it's better all around to keep your distance. But Jesus won't have it that way. No, Jesus says, "Come to me."

"Come to me if you're hungry or thirsty. Come to me if you're tired. Come to me if you're sick. Come to me if you're lonely. Come to me if you're confused. Come to me if you're scared."

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So come to Jesus. If you've never done it or if you need to do it again, come to Jesus. Give up the fight. Surrender. Tell him, "Jesus, I'm coming." Then take one step. And take another. Come home to Jesus. Just as you are, come home to Jesus. There is no more distance.

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Glory and thanks be to God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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