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2nd Chronicles 7:4-6,8-14, English Standard Version.

⁴ Then the king and all the people offered sacrifice before the LORD. ⁵ King Solomon offered as a sacrifice 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. So the king and all the people dedicated the house of God. ⁶ The priests stood at their posts; the Levites also, with the instruments for music to the LORD that King David had made for giving thanks to the LORD—for his steadfast love endures forever—whenever David offered praises by their ministry; opposite them the priests sounded trumpets, and all Israel stood.

⁸ At that time Solomon held the feast for seven days, and all Israel with him, a very great assembly, from Lebo-hamath to the Brook of Egypt. ⁹ And on the eighth day they held a solemn assembly, for they had kept the dedication of the altar seven days and the feast seven days. ¹⁰ On the twenty-third day of the seventh month he sent the people away to their homes, joyful and glad of heart for the prosperity that the LORD had granted to David and to Solomon and to Israel his people.

¹¹ Thus Solomon finished the house of the LORD and the king's house. All that Solomon had planned to do in the house of the LORD and in his own house he successfully accomplished. ¹² Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. ¹³ When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, ¹⁴ if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Free.

King Solomon, the son of King David, built what became known as the First Temple, which was later destroyed by the Babylonians. 2nd Chronicles contains 36 Chapters; the first 7 describe the building of that First Temple. A very famous

passage is in Chapter 5, where the celebration that follows the opening of the Temple is described. Here is a compressed version of that celebration, as the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the tablets God gave Moses, is brought into the Temple:

¹¹ The priests came out of the Most Holy Place, ¹² and the Levites who were the singers, all stood at the east end of the altar, clothed in white linen, having cymbals, stringed instruments and harps, and with them one hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets—¹³ indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the LORD, saying:

“For He is good, For His mercy endures forever,”

that the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, ¹⁴ so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.

Consider a passage that comes two chapters later; it describes the continued ceremonies that follow the opening of the First Temple. I want to focus on the very last part of this quote:

¹² Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. ¹³ When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, ¹⁴ if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

God is so pleased with this magnificent Temple, the home of the tablets God gave Moses and the Holy Place of the Israelites, that God makes a promise: if

God should ever decide to punish the Israelites with a flood or locusts, and if the Israelites then repent and humble themselves and *seek God's face*, then God will forgive and bless them. God will set them free from guilt and fear.

There are two “double” sets of books in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible: 1st and 2nd Chronicles and 1st and 2nd Kings. There are a lot of similarities between these two sets of paired books. The Kings books were written around 550 B.C., during the Babylonian exile, and the Chronicles were written around 450 B.C., after the exile. The Kings and Chronicles books cover a similar period of time. Much of it involves the history from King Saul (King David's father) through the exile in Babylon. Both sets of books focus on King David. There is a difference though between the Chronicles books and the Kings books. Here is the major, but often missed difference between the two sets of books. The Chronicles books clean up the reputation of the various kings of Israel. The Chronicles do this by removing a lot of the bad stuff, like the downside of the reign of Solomon. In the Kings books, we see that he loses his way in the final years of his reign. But if you only read Chronicles, you would think that Solomon's time as king was a total success. This makes sense: Chronicles was written later, after the exile, when the Israelites were trying to re-establish themselves as God's Chosen People. It is a

period of renewal, not regret. The passages we have looked at so far come from one of the “upbeat” books, 2nd Chronicles.

Let me turn to an incident that happened at the hospital. As always, I am changing details to protect the privacy of those involved. I was called to a room because a woman was actively dying. She was about my age. She had had a stroke and a decision had been made by her daughter to let her go, given the massive injury to her brain. The daughter, we’ll call her Angela, was crying softly as she held her mother’s hand. I told her that I was very sorry that she was losing her mother. Then Angela said that her mother’s rented house in Boulder was filled with boxes; she had lived there for fifteen years. Everything she owned had been boxed up. She had been due to move back home to Connecticut the very next day. Angela said that she had had a sister named Claire. But Claire who had had two very small children had died in a car accident fifteen years before. When Claire died, her husband was around, but he was an abusive man who had no time for his children. So, fifteen years ago, Angela and Claire’s mother had moved to Colorado to raise Claire’s kids. Back then, they would have preferred to move Claire’s kids back home to Connecticut, but Claire’s husband had used his parental rights to keep the kids in Colorado.

So, this grandmother, who was now dying in our ICU, had spent fifteen years of her life raising two children two thousand miles away from her home. We'll call this mother MaryAnne. The kids were grown now, and Angela had talked her mother into packing up and moving back home to Connecticut. Then, just a few days before she was due to move back, she had had a massive stroke. Angela was crying, saying that after all those years of her mother being away, she had hoped to have some time with MaryAnne. I said that this was very sad, but it showed how deeply good her mother was. Angela's mother had taken her retirement years, when she should have been relaxing and enjoying life, and invested them in her grandkids. I told Angela that she could remember her mother as having done something beautiful with her life. Then Angela told me that both she and her mother were Christians, and she knew that her mother would be in Heaven. But she would still miss her, still feel cheated that after all those years, she wasn't going to get time on Earth with her mother. MaryAnne, Claire told me, had always sought the face of God, because God would always forgive and heal her. I said that's from 2nd Chronicles. Angela didn't know that. It was just what her mother had taught her when she was growing up, that she should always seek out the face of God. I said that although it was indeed sad,

her mother's story was very poetic. She had served her grandchildren, and right when she was done – she had found the face of God in a very literal sense.

That is what all of us should do. Whatever happens in life, whether it is good or bad, whether it is what we planned and hoped for or whether it is what we never dreamed in our worst nightmare could happen – we should always be seeking the face of God. That is what MaryAnne had spent fifteen years doing. And she succeeded. Claire's children were doing great. When we seek the face of God consistently, we always find ourselves in the right place. We'll be joyous now and joyous forever. God will set us free from regret.

Here is a passage from the end of 2nd Kings. I have abbreviated it:

25 Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siegeworks all around it. ³On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. ⁴Then a breach was made in the city. The army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. ⁶Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon and they passed sentence on him. ⁷They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon. ⁸In the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. ⁹And he burned the house of the LORD and broke down the walls around Jerusalem.

1st and 2nd Kings were originally one book in the Hebrew. 1st Kings begins near the end of King David's reign and Second Kings ends during the exile in Babylon. We see, in 2nd Kings, that 410 years after the celebration that we read about in 2nd

Chronicles, the grand Temple built by King Solomon is destroyed by the Babylonians, and many of the leading citizens of Israel are sent into exile in Babylon. Does this erase the glory that we read about in 2nd Chronicles, where the First Temple is built by King Solomon and dedicated in a grand ceremony? Of course not. That Temple stood for four centuries. Imagine all the generations of people who worshipped there, who found solace there, who discovered their God there. Nothing on this planet is permanent. The United States hasn't even been around for 250 years.

As we stood by her mother while she died, Angela told me that her children had barely known their grandmother. All the while they were growing up, MaryAnne was a couple of thousand miles away, with her sister's kids. Angela just felt so cheated, that her kids didn't get to know their grandmother the way that Claire's kids did. MaryAnne, Angela told me, was more than just giving and kind. She was one of those very rare people who was always joyous in her giving. She never spoke of the drudgery of raising a second generation of kids. She always spoke lovingly of Claire's two children. MaryAnne had said fifteen years before that when she looked into the face of God, she saw those kids, who had no father or mother – and MaryAnne knew that instead of relaxing during her later years, she should do as the Bible said, and humble herself and be a mother again.

Remember that although the Temple that King Solomon built was destroyed after standing for 400 years, and although the Israelites were sent into exile in Babylon, the empire of the Babylonians eventually fell. In fact, it was less than 50 years later when the Babylonians were conquered by King Cyrus of Persia, and Cyrus set the Israelites free, allowing them to return to their Promised Land. Cyrus actually orders the Israelites to build a new temple, which they do. The Second Temple was completed in about 515 B.C. This is the cycle of faith in the Old Testament. It is the cycle of human history. It is the cycle of human life: unbelievable joy followed by grinding tragedy, followed by limitless joy again.

Angela told me that she knew that it was far more important for her mother to have been with her sister's children. Unlike Claire's kids, Angela's kids had both a loving mother and a loving father. Angela's kids were already old enough to understand why their grandmother had never been around, why she had hardly been a part of their lives. I said to Angela that when she returned home, she should make sure that her kids are reminded of beauty of their grandmother's life, of her incredible love. They would have cousins with memories of a stable, caring home. These cousins would be on the right path in life – due to their grandmother. One of the last things that Angela told me was that when she came to Colorado to see her mother in the hospital, she had spent

some time with her sister's children, who were now older teenagers. She said it made her happy seeing how well they were doing.

Yes, the First Temple was destroyed. But it was rebuilt. If we remain focused on the face of God, if we live for God's blessings and do not let tough times break us, we will live in joy and we will never lose hope. We will know that God does indeed have a plan – and although that plan is far too complex for us to comprehend, it is a perfect plan. God's way always works out for the best in the long run. Never forget the words of God, spoken to King Solomon at the dedication of the First Temple, the one that stood for 400 years:

"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. ¹³When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, ¹⁴if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

Indeed, if we keep our eyes on the face of God, we will be free of all worry, all anxiety, all fear. We *will* be free. Please pray with me.

God, we live with more than hope in our hearts. We live with the knowledge that you will absolutely never abandon us. We live knowing that when we look into your face, we see only joy. Amen.