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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham in the Central Hall,  
Philpot Street, London E. on the occasion  
of the opening of the new Zoar Chapel

Friday afternoon 3 February 1922

Text: 1 Kings 8 verse 27

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the  
heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee; how much less  
this house that I have builded."

It would seem that Solomon had an overwhelming sense of the  
majesty of God as he was opening this wonderful building, this  
magnificent temple; as if his eye of faith was directed and  
carried heavenward, and the eternal God appeared to his faith and  
he saw eternal majesty - Jehovah - as only faith can see Him -  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, one God, Creator of  
heaven and earth and all that therein is, and the sea and all  
that is therein. And the contrast was so great between that  
blessed One and this poor little house - no more now in his view,  
perhaps, than a dunghill, and men, sinful men on the earth  
polluting it, that he asks this question. Can He, the blessed  
God, holy, holy, holy, infinitely so - can this God indeed dwell  
on the earth? Is there a place on the earth for Him whom the  
heaven of heavens cannot contain? Is there a spot which is in  
any way worthy of His holy presence? This was apparently the  
frame of mind that Solomon was in as he was dedicating to the  
great God the house which he had built, in which the name of the  
Lord had been placed. And indeed it is good when it pleases God  
to give such a sense of His infinite majesty to any sinner as to  
bring that sinner into the dust, to make him feel that he himself  
is but as a dunghill, nothing but corruption, and to fill him  
with an amazing question. Here I am a vile sinner; I have  
corrupted my way on earth; I am earthly, sensual, devilish,  
prone to every evil, and as incapable of improving myself as the  
leopard is incapable of changing his spots or the Ethiopian of  
making his black skin white. And is it so indeed that that God,  
before whom I tremble, at whose word I tremble, that God, who is

incapable of change, incapable of extension in any sense whatsoever, is it so indeed that He can come and dwell on such a bit of earth, such a corrupted bit of earth as I am in myself? Do you sympathise with that? Have you felt it in any measure with respect to yourselves? There are reasons, apparent reasons, great and cogent reasons why we should conclude, as only knowing God naturally, that He cannot dwell on the earth. They are these very briefly. First, that the earth is utterly corrupted. Man hath corrupted his way upon the earth; nothing but sin for God to look on; thorns and thistles brought about by sin; men's hearts wild in rebellion and corrupted with iniquities, and their whole being burdened with awful guilt, and deserving nothing but eternal damnation. What a reason is this apparently why God should not come and dwell on the earth. Look at the contrast, the great and glorious God, holy, holy, holy, of too pure eyes to behold iniquity, unable to look on sin. Think of this. And if indeed you have felt the contrast you have wondered, not only whether He could come and dwell with you, but have still more wondered how He could have allowed you, so wicked, to live on the earth.

It is, again, an all but incredible thing that God can come and dwell on the earth because He is just, absolutely, and He can find no man on the earth just, not one. "There is no man that doeth good and sinneth not". And what communion can injustice and infinite justice have? What fellowship can there be between one whose heart is unutterably wicked, full of all injustice and baseness, ready to twist everything from right and to turn all things upside down - what communion can there be between such a creature and the glorious God? And then there is this other reason, which let me name, that God is, as I said at the beginning, immense. "The heaven of heavens cannot contain Him", how much less the poor, foolish, contracted heart of a creature, a sinner, a sinner in darkness? "Ye were sometimes darkness". The understanding is darkened and alienated from the life of God, and "what communion hath light with darkness?" The infinite distance that there is between God and men is realised in a degree by all who are under the teaching of the Holy Spirit. The distance between God and men is infinite, between the creature,

as considered without sin, and his Creator. But in that distance there is no shame, there can be no shame. There is no shame in elect angels. They are creatures, there is no shame attached to their creatureship. They feel the infinite distance there is between themselves and the infinite God with whom they live, they veil their faces and cry "Holy, holy, holy" but there is no real shame. And so in man, there was no shame in Eden till sin came. God could come, and did come, into that unpolluted garden, to that undefiled man, and that man, in that condition, could have fellowship with God. But now it is different. Sin has contracted, blinded, polluted, deadened and killed that creature. And here we are, just in that state. So it must be said, "Can God indeed, will God indeed dwell on the earth?" Did you ever seriously ask the question of yourselves? If we have asked the question out of that spirit that prompted it in Solomon, it may be that God has given to us an answer, an answer which the scripture contains, an answer which the scripture loudly, in every page of it, proclaims. God will do it; He will dwell on the earth.

And let me give you here one or two very powerful, divinely revealed reasons why God will dwell on the earth. The first is - because He will, simply because He will. Not because there is some attraction in a creature, not because He is infinitely liberal and men immeasurably poor, not because there are hearts that are saying to Him "Canst Thou, wilt Thou, come?" No, there is in the creature really no reason why God should come, because the creature is sinful. But in Himself, apart from all attractions, or the consideration of attractions, or the possibility of attractions, there is in God Himself alone considered the great and first reason why He will dwell on the earth, and that is because He will. "He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy". If He says "I will dwell here", that is the reason, and that will make the dwelling-place one day for Him. If He come to the earth, though the earth be in that particular spot where He descends, as common as all the other parts of the earth, the moment He comes because He will come, then it is holy ground. (Exodus III, 5) When God comes, things are done immediately. His great will, that divine will that controls all,

that moved Him to say "Let there be" and there was, that moved Him to make the earth and then to form it into the beautiful world which we live in, the will of God was supreme in all that, and may we never lose sight of that great truth. First of all, above all, permeating all, influenced by nothing outside Himself, is the holy, invincible, immutable, absolutely free will of God. Indeed there is no will free but His. Men may boast of a free will, but there is no such thing existing as a free will except God's will. We think we are free in deciding to do this and declining to do that, moving in this direction and deciding not to move in that direction, but, after all, the freedom we boast of is not a freedom at all, because the mind in deciding to do this or declining to do that is influenced by considerations as to the convenience or inconvenience, the good promised or the evil threatened in such and such courses. We are influenced by reasons outside ourselves, and our wills are under the control, more or less distinctly, of external circumstances. God's will has no such influence brought to bear upon it. That is the first reason. Here we are, we are living, because God wills that we should live; we are what we are today as creatures, because God has willed that we should be just that - not sinners, but creatures. And when you come to the reality and effect of sin, then as many as are godly people here, christian men and women, born again, will acknowledge that it is absolutely the fruit of the divine will, in the first instance, that we are what we are in that important respect.

Secondly, God will dwell on the earth because He has some men on it with whom He will dwell. And this is election, this is that wondrous, mysterious, effectual decree of the Holy Trinity, that some men are predestinated to be children of the living God, "blest", as the Apostle Paul teaches in the Ephesians (chapter 1 verses 3 and 4) "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ; according as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world ...." Then the eye of infinite wisdom looked down upon the mass of human nature and said "That lump shall be a vessel of mercy; that lump shall be a vessel of mercy" O, if God said that of us, if God said that of you and me, we shall need eternity to thank Him for such an act of

goodness, undeserved, in every sense of the word undeserved.

And because God will dwell with some men, because He has chosen them unto eternal life, chosen them to obtain salvation by Jesus Christ, (I Thessalonians V verse 9) He devised means (II Samuel XIV verse 14) and set up a Man, the Man Christ Jesus, from all eternity, in whom He could be and in whom the elected ones shall be and were. And there shall be their meeting place and their dwelling place. God was in Christ, and the elected people of God are in Christ - "Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, that they should be holy and without blame before Him in love." (Ephesians 1 verse 4) This is very wonderful. It is, according to the gospel "the exceeding riches of His grace" given to Christ for His people "before the world began" (II Timothy I verse 9) It is the effect of the love of God; a great act, like a great wave of divine love passing over the Church as in Christ. It is the infinite kindness of God appearing (Titus III verse 4) for those given to Christ from before the foundation of the world. It is the sweetness of mercy, the melting mercy of God. It is that which brings sinners to subjection, that makes them thankful to lose themselves and to die as to themselves, when they begin to live in a manifestation of the Son of God in their hearts. God dwells with men in His beloved Son. And there it is that light communes with light, that is when God comes to His enlightened people. There it is that holiness attracts God who loves holiness and loves it wherever He finds it because He Himself has given it. There it is He finds a real rest. As when the six days' work were ended He rested on the seventh and called it Sabbath, so when He finds a sinner by divine grace is tired, worn out, dead, helpless, He comes to him and in His beloved Son embraces that sinner and finds the rest that He wants in that sinner. It is truly wonderful to all who realise it that Infinity should rest in the creature; that the great God should rest in a creature. And, as when we rest we are content and wish to go no farther, so, when God comes and rests in a sinner's heart, He is content and He goes no farther. "This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell for I have desired it" (Psalm 132 verse 14) Did you ever get that? Did God ever receive any pleasure in any of us and find rest in us? If so, it was all

because He found us in Christ where He had put us in eternity in an act of election.

He will dwell on the earth, again, because He has received satisfaction for His people in the atoning work of His dearly beloved Son, Jesus Christ, as it is written in the Corinthians (II Epistle V verse 19) "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself not imputing their trespasses unto them" What a wonder! Here is a sinner, always quarrelling with God. There is nothing right in God for man as fallen. Do you wonder at the infidelity that there is in the world? Do you wonder at the learned of the world today, answering to the doctors and scribes and lawyers and pharisees of old, quarrelling with God and His word, cutting it to pieces, trampling it under foot? Do you wonder if you hear men saying "Well, we would not do this, and if God does it He is not just?" One knowing himself, and having those abominations in his heart, and, alas, feeling them at times distinctly and powerfully working within, uttering mischief against the Lord, muttering and peeping into things that are not to be understood by fallen reason, cannot wonder that men, left to themselves, should mutter and peep and speak against God (Isaiah VIII, 19) It is no wonder to me that the world is full of infidels. The wonder is that there is one less than there used to be. And yet God comes and deals with a sinner, deals with him in his conscience, reveals something of divine majesty and holiness and glory. That sinner is guilty (Romans III, 19) Then comes this blessed God and reveals Himself in Christ and reconciles this sinner to Himself, makes him willing to come down to God's terms, reconciles him to God's perfections, makes him willing, willing and thankful that God is what He is, and would not have Him other than He is. Brings him to His terms, I say, a proud man, willing to be plunged into debt to a good God, plunged into the debt of free and sovereign grace, and to a forgiveness that is absolute and undeserved, and to a justification to which the sinner can contribute nothing, not one single act, not one holy desire. So God will dwell with men, "reconciling them unto Himself by Jesus Christ, not imputing their trespasses unto them, for He hath made Him (that is His Son) to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."

(Romans V. 19, 21)

Then, in the next place, and briefly, God will dwell with communities or churches. His glory is in the Church by Christ Jesus, world without end (Ephesians III, 21) and the one Church is, if I may so speak, broken up into many churches; churches we know and are associated with; churches to which He has delivered His ordinances; churches to which He has given grace that they may observe them and keep them inviolate. "Here will I dwell" said He of this temple. "This is my rest, here will I dwell for I have desired it" (Psalm 132 v 14) And one of the greatest wonders that can be found on this polluted earth is a little church of gracious people, born again and gathered together in the holy providence of God, where sinners are united to the Head, Jesus Christ, and to one another in Him; where they find God at times paying them love visits and speaking kindly to their hearts; where, when trouble comes, there is sympathy; when God visits them, humility and worship are found; when the gospel is preached there is a reception of it in the faith that God has wrought in the heart. This is where God dwells. There is strictly the invisible church of Christ; none can say who are elect. God knows them; they know each other as hearing each other's experience, and they do assume that what is said is true and honestly said, and so they receive each other in the Lord. Thus they are constituted into gospel churches and God dwells among them. He says, "Come out, be ye separate, save yourselves from this untoward generation; come out from the world - the religious as well and even more so after a time - the religious world as well as the profane world; come out from among them, be ye separate, says the Lord and I will receive you and will walk among you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (II Corinthians VI 17 and 18) He becomes a Father to them in manifestation; He opens to them His Fatherly love. He opens it to them in giving to them the word of truth, and He opens it to them in chastising them when they walk away from the holy commandments delivered to them in the holy gospel (II Peter II, 21) - not commandments to obtain life by, but commandments such as a father gives to his family. It is not at all incongruous that a father should give rules for his family to be

regulated by. "Walk" He says "in this My way, walk in these My ordinances".

So the answer to this question by Solomon is that God will dwell, does dwell on the earth, that He, whom the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain, does take up His gracious abode in the hearts of sinners and so unites them to Himself and to one another. There is no union amongst the Lord's people to be compared with that which is derived from the powerful presence and love of God manifested to them and brought and "shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto them."  
(Romans V,5)

Now dear friends, we are met today as if we were opening the new chapel. One would be glad if it were large enough to contain this congregation, and if such a congregation were always gathered there whenever the doors were opened, but that is not the case. But today, in a true sense in the spirit of it, we meet in the new chapel, open it as it were, for the public, and, we hope, constant service of the most high God. And the friends who, not numerous, are one in their aim and have made great efforts to bring to pass by God's assistance what has happened today, do, I believe, seek to have that presence with them that will make the house they are to worship in the House of God, and even, one would wish and hope, "the gate of heaven" to their souls (Genesis 28, 17) This house is built for His great name. High is that courage of faith, God-given faith, that can and does say to the Almighty "Do come and fill this House". And what a wonder it will be to the worshippers if when they are there they are not able to stand because of the glory of God filling the house (I Kings VIII 10 and 11 and II Chronicles V, 13 and 14), that is if human nature cannot stand, if pride is broken, if human reason is subjected, if the will is subdued, if the mind is purified, if Christ comes and says "Here will I dwell". Here shall be My grace in powerful operations; here shall be My love in sweet experience known; here shall be My atonement in the peace of conscience felt; here shall be My righteousness worn for the sensible justification of these people and here shall be My presence as a wall of fire separating them from the world and

protecting them from all evil."

Our friends have Articles of Faith, as every church ought to have, sound, good, gospel Articles of Faith. What will make those Articles effectual in the understanding of the people? The powerful teaching of the Holy Ghost, nothing less. You could not do anything with Articles of Faith, however sound, if you have not an experience of their truth and of their sweetness and of their power in the heart by the Holy Ghost. Good as it is, and proper, to have them, this and this alone will make them effectual in the hearts of His people and make them true to them in their understandings, namely, the experience of the power of them by the teaching of the Eternal Spirit.

"Will God indeed dwell on the earth?" Now, have you got an answer? Can you answer Erskine's word

Dost mind the place, the spot of land  
Where Jesus did thee meet?  
How He got thy heart and hand?  
Thy Husband then was sweet.

Was there ever a place in your house, a corner in your room, or on your bed, behind a hedge, in your factory, in your office, at your work, where you found God with you? When you could say and did say with the church of old "The voice of my Beloved; behold He cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills." (Song II,8) A time when He said - "Come with Me My love, My sister, .. the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the spring is come, the birds sing, the flowers appear, all things are made new because I have come, come with Me and I will give thee my loves." (V, 10-12) If you have found that you have got in your heart the very answer that the scripture gives to this question "To that man will I look and with him will I dwell who is of a poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at My word." (Isaiah 66, 2) So may it be.

AMEN.