

Lesson 14: King Solomon (1 Kings 1-11; 2 Chronicles 1-9)

David Chooses Solomon

King David nears the end of his life.¹ He has lived a rich and full life, filled with both tragedy and glory. Now that David approaches death the obvious question for everyone around him is who will succeed him? Who will be the next king? The simple answer is that it would be his oldest son. The problem is that David has taken many wives, his three eldest sons have already died, and it is not clear which one of his remaining sons has a right to the throne. Adonijah is the oldest living son and assumes that he will be the next king and assembles allies around him.² There is a problem, however, in that God has already chosen Solomon to be the successor.³

The prophet Nathan and David's wife, Bathsheba, will not let David forget what God has in mind. They remind David that it is not Adonijah who is to succeed him, but Solomon. It is worth noting that Nathan, while he does not have any official political power, is frequently at the center of action. In the Old Testament the prophets often play a check on the power of the king, much like America has two other branches of government that limit the power of the President. Bathsheba tells David that he had promised that Solomon would be his successor. David confirms the promise, intervenes and orders Solomon to be recognized as the next king rather than Adonijah.⁴ Again, just like with Sarah and Rebekah, we see the resourcefulness of a woman in directing the future of God's plan.⁵

David publicly recognizes Solomon by having him ride on a mule into the city.⁶ This image is precisely why Jesus rides an ass into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It harkens back to Solomon as if to say, "I am coming into the city this way because I am the new king of Israel." Jesus, then, sets himself in opposition to both Herod and Caesar who claimed to be over the Jews. This is how the Jewish leadership has him killed only a week later. It is his identity as king that is the justification for his crucifixion since there cannot be another king over Israel. In addition to riding into Jerusalem on an ass, Solomon is consecrated as king through an anointing with oil, which is in part why priestly ordination today uses oil and prefigures Jesus' own anointing.⁷

In his exchange with Bathsheba, David says, "As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my soul out of every adversity."⁸ This is a simple but profound statement. David acknowledges that in His mercy God wrote straight with David's crooked lines. David fell many times but he did not stay there. David acknowledged his sin, got up and moved

¹ 1 Kings 1:1

² 1 Kings 1:5-10; 2:22

³ 1 Chronicles 28:5-6

⁴ 1 Kings 1:30

⁵ cf. Genesis 18:9-14; 27:1-36. The way these women participate in leading salvation history in directions no one could have anticipated is similar to the way Mary, the Mother of God, cooperates in salvation history.

⁶ 1 Kings 1:33

⁷ CCC, ##436, 438, 1574

⁸ 1 Kings 1:29

forward in pursuit of God. This is an important lesson for the Christian life. Perfection is not counted in never falling but in quickly getting up and recommitting oneself to the pursuit of the Lord. As Mother Theresa would say, “God does not ask for success, just fidelity.”

As David lay dying he says to Solomon that he is about to “go the way of all the earth,”⁹ which is similar to what we hear on Ash Wednesday (“Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return”). In his near final words David exhorts Solomon to keep the commandments of the Lord.¹⁰ In a sense he is saying, “I’ve been king and I know what it takes to be successful. Obey the Lord and you will be fine.” David quotes God, “If your sons take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a man on the throne of Israel.”¹¹ This is a pretty heady promise, but with a strong qualifier: *if*. The blessings from the Lord are contingent upon fidelity to the law.¹² David is reminding his son to take obedience to the law seriously; the success of his kingship is not guaranteed. This should be a warning to Solomon that there is no fate; his future is not predestined. God respects our freedom and will not make us do anything, and blessings from the Lord are contingent upon our faithfulness to Him. After a bit more instruction, David dies and leaves the kingdom to Solomon.¹³

Solomon Begins His Reign

With the death of David, Solomon is now king. He has received final counsel from his father as to how he should be a good king, namely, he must follow the commandments. Unfortunately, from there are red flags raised as to whether Solomon will heed his father’s advice when the Scripture almost innocently notes, “Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh King of Egypt.”¹⁴ This marriage alliance, however, is not innocent at all. First of all Solomon marries an Egyptian, which compromises his values and loyalty to Yahweh since an Egyptian wife would certainly bring the culture and cultic worship with her which, as we have seen many times already, is worship to false gods. This is in direct violation to the Mosaic law which prohibits marriage with idolatrous nations.¹⁵ It seems Solomon has no interest in his father’s advice. The law also forbids the king from pursuing great wealth, power and women.¹⁶ A king who uses his authority to pursue these things will bring his kingship to ruin. We will see that this will become a serious issue with Solomon.

“Solomon loved the Lord...only, he sacrificed and burnt incense at high places.”¹⁷ The qualification of Solomon’s love for the Lord is quite serious. The Hebrew word for “high

⁹ 1 Kings 2:2

¹⁰ 1 Kings 2:3-4

¹¹ 1 Kings 2:4

¹² We see with Jesus’ perfect obedience to the law he is king forever (cf. Philippians 2; Revelation 1:15; 17:14).

¹³ 1 Kings 2:10

¹⁴ 1 Kings 3:1

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 7:1-14; see also Deuteronomy 23:3-8 and Joshua 23:12

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 17:16-17

¹⁷ 1 Kings 3:3

places” is “bamah” which is a feature of the worship system of the Canaanites. This seems to more than suggest that Solomon builds places of worship for idolatry. The fact that Solomon loves the Lord is a good thing, but that he builds places for idol worship is a terrible crime in the eyes of God.¹⁸ Solomon loves the Lord but it seems he does not love Him above everything else. He loves other things, perhaps even more than he loves God. This is his difficulty – he loves God, but he is attached to other things that keep him from loving God above everything else. This attachment to things other than God will prove to be fatal to his reign. The temptation to attachment, incidentally, is the purpose of Lent: to detach from things that keep us from God. In the end only God satisfies and will make us happy. Material things are not bad in themselves. In fact, they can be the means to great good, but when they get between us and God they become a form of idolatry that kills the soul. This is why, if we want to be truly happy, we must break ourselves away from the things that distract us from God so we can be totally free for Him. We may often want temporal goods because we think that is what will make us happy, but God knows that we are made for more. Giving up small pleasures is a way to form the soul to desire God first.

Solomon’s Wisdom Grows

Even with this auspicious beginning God is willing to give Solomon more gifts. In a dream God appears to Solomon and asks him what he would like to receive. Solomon does not ask for anything material but for the gift of wisdom so that he may govern well.¹⁹ This indicates that there is a spark of humility in Solomon. His request reflects what is contained in the Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Solomon recognizes that material gain does not satisfy, and that he is in need of assistance from the Lord. This also echoes the sentiment of Jesus when he says, “apart from me you can do nothing.”²⁰ God is pleased with Solomon’s request and so gives him wealth and honor in addition to his request for wisdom.²¹ It is tempting to see this as a great blessing for Solomon but we will see that it is not so much a blessing but a test. Some authors have suggested that God’s entrustment of Solomon with riches is analogous to Jesus giving Judas control over the purse: it will either make him more virtuous or will show his true covetous, greedy heart.

Perhaps as an exercise of his newfound wisdom, Solomon divides all of Israel into twelve regions, based on the twelve tribes of Israel. The purpose of this reorganization is to charge each new district with the responsibility of maintaining the royal household and the cost of government for one month a year.²² Solomon, however, rather than dividing the costs evenly, requires the ten northern tribes to carry the full cost of the taxes. The

¹⁸ For later kings not to remove the high places was a serious offense. See 1 Kings 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35.

¹⁹ 1 Kings 3:6-9

²⁰ John 15:5; Only Jesus is credited with having more wisdom than Solomon (cf. Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31), and that Jesus is the very wisdom of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:24).

²¹ 1 Kings 3:11-13

²² 1 Kings 4:7-19; 1 Samuel 8:10ff. The new geographical division of the Twelve Tribes does not correspond to the traditional inheritance of the tribes. Solomon’s action is comparable to an American president realigning the boundaries of the fifty states and then placing his own men as the governors of each state to fit his political purposes.

tribes of Judah and Benjamin (Judah's younger brother) do not have to pay a tax. This causes rivalry between the northern and the southern tribes, and from here forward Israel is not spoken of as one united nation, but as a divided kingdom. The new division of Israel is also a change in political power from the regional traditions and time-honored loyalties to a system where these natural alliances are divided into regional governors, who are appointed by the regime in Jerusalem. It is subtle and sophisticated, but it is a play by Solomon to consolidate political power. Depending upon one's perspective, this could be another indication of Solomon's wisdom, although it is self-serving wisdom.

The Temple

In his wisdom, Solomon begins to build the Temple (961 BC) from the plans given to him by his father King David.²³ The building of the Temple by King Solomon is one of the most important events in the history of Israel. This is now 900 years after Jacob and his family went down into Egypt, and 480 years after the people of Israel escaped Egypt. God gave the plans to David so that a permanent place for God's dwelling would be constructed. God says to Solomon during the construction of the Temple, "Concerning this house which you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my ordinances and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel."²⁴ Again, we see the blessing of the Lord promised but connected to the fidelity of the people to the commandments.

The Scripture tells us that it took Solomon seven years to build the Temple, with gold and precious stones throughout.²⁵ This might sound impressive except for the fact that we are then told that it takes Solomon thirteen years to build his own house.²⁶ His own house is practically twice as big as the Temple! This is a big red flag that Solomon does not have his priorities in order. We will see that just as he violated the command not to take more than one wife and not to adopt foreign cults, he is tempted to violate the command for kings not to accumulate wealth. He uses his wisdom not first for the work of the Lord, but for himself. God does receive the fruit of his wisdom, but only after Solomon takes care of himself.

At the completion of the Temple Solomon has the priests consecrate it. He acknowledges it as the place of sacrifice and atonement, but more importantly the place where Yahweh dwells among the people.²⁷ The Spirit of the Lord comes down on the Temple, just as the

²³ 1 Chronicles 28:11-19

²⁴ 1 Kings 6:11-13

²⁵ 1 Kings 6:38. The Church has always thought that the beauty of sacred art and buildings invite the faithful, or non-believer, into the presence of God. It is fitting, therefore, that just as Solomon arrayed the Temple with magnificent beauty, the Church today should dedicate itself to the construction of beautiful churches. A study of church architecture throughout the centuries reveals much more than beautiful buildings, but the architecture itself reveals the belief of the people. Just one example is how the older churches were once built with the altar always oriented toward the east (just as the Temple was built). This conveyed the belief in the Resurrection, that Christ would rise again, with the sun as a symbol, from the east.

²⁶ 1 Kings 7:1

²⁷ CCC, #2580

Spirit came upon the waters at creation,²⁸ and upon the Ark of the Covenant,²⁹ in the same way the Spirit will overshadow Mary at the Annunciation, making her the Ark of the New Covenant and new Temple of the Lord.³⁰ The consecration of the Temple is the action by which the Spirit comes down upon the Temple and dwells among the people. Jesus himself recognizes the Temple as the house of God.³¹ It is interesting to note that the Temple will be destroyed and rebuilt, but it will never be re-consecrated.³² The Spirit does not take its place back in the re-built temple, but in the new temple of Mary and the Church.

Solomon's Fall

Once Solomon finishes building the Temple, the Lord appears to him a second time giving him a solemn warning: "I have consecrated this house which you have built, and put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time. And for you, *if* you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever... *But* if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, *then* I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; and the house which I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight... And this house will become a heap of ruins; everyone passing by it will be astonished... and they will say, 'Why has the Lord done this?' Then they will say, 'Because they forsook the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt and laid hold on other gods and worshipped them.'"³³

So we see that the Lord will bless Solomon *if* he follows his law, but if he turns from the law, he will be punished.³⁴ The blessings, as we have seen many times already, are tied to fidelity to the law. If Solomon is not faithful, God promises to destroy everything that he has gained. The stakes are very high for Solomon and all of Israel, and yet Solomon's choices indicate that he is controlled more by his thirst for wealth, power and pleasure than for love of God.

God fulfills His promise to bless Israel as He promised to Moses,³⁵ but Solomon turns this blessing on himself.³⁶ Solomon hoards so much wealth that he builds additional cities to hold his inventory.³⁷ He also builds ships and chariots (usually used as offensive

²⁸ Genesis 1:2

²⁹ Exodus 40:34

³⁰ Luke 1:35

³¹ cf. Matthew 21:13; John 2:16

³² It is perhaps more than coincidence that the total destruction of the Temple (70 AD) would happen at almost the exact same time as the appearance of the Church which is the new Temple of God.

³³ 1 Kings 9:3-9

³⁴ 1 Kings 6:11-13; 9:1-7

³⁵ Deuteronomy 27-28

³⁶ This is a common temptation through which God tests our hearts to see that which we truly love, Him or ourselves.

³⁷ 1 Kings 9:19-22

weapons) that betray his thirst for power.³⁸ How did he acquire this wealth? Through heavy taxation he enslaved all of the nations. With just one tax, the Scripture says, he raked in 666 talents of gold – a number we see in Revelation as a mark of the beast, the devil.³⁹ Solomon, rather than using his wisdom as a light to the nations, uses it to enslave the nations. Rather than sending out envoys to teach the Torah (the law), he sends out tax collectors. This is a grave violation of his calling.

To complete his betrayal of the law, Solomon takes 700 wives and 300 concubines.⁴⁰ Remember, this is expressly forbidden in Deuteronomy.⁴¹ Moses warned that taking foreign wives would lead a king to turn his heart to worship false gods, even to the point of offering child sacrifice. This is exactly what happens with Solomon, “For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart to other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.”⁴² To accommodate his wives he goes so far as to adopt their cultic practices (which, we might say, is an example of false ecumenism where one’s own faith is lost in the process). Solomon goes on to offer sacrifices to a number of false gods, including Molech.⁴³ Molech is a pagan god whose worship includes child sacrifice.⁴⁴ It might be easy to see how Solomon turns his loyalty, even idolatry, to Molech when, with so many wives and concubines, he would have many children vying for his wealth and authority. John Paul II said, “A nation that kills its children has no future.” This was certainly true for Israel, and it might be true today in our age of abortion, but idolatry can take many less obvious forms.⁴⁵ Solomon sets in train the destruction of the kingdom, all of which could have been avoided if he would have heeded the advice to meditate on the Law of God day and night.⁴⁶ All of this might have been avoided if Solomon had only spent time in prayer and mediation as his father, David, certainly would have counseled him.⁴⁷

In his evil ways, Solomon sets up the destruction of the Kingdom (as we will see in the next chapter) and is condemned by God Himself. Saul, remember, hears about his rejection by God from Samuel, and David takes rebuke from Nathan, but Solomon gets it directly from the Lord. Solomon destroys everything because he does not meditate on the Law. He was not to acquire wealth, power or wives, and yet this is exactly what he does, which then leads to the destruction of the Kingdom.

Ecclesiastes

This is all a very sad tale of personal failure that affects an entire nation, however there is hope that Solomon did see the error of his ways at the end of his life and repented. As David is forever linked with the Psalms, Solomon is linked with the wisdom literature

³⁸ 1 Kings 10:26

³⁹ 1 Kings 10:14 and Revelation ?

⁴⁰ 1 Kings 11:3

⁴¹ Deuteronomy 17:14ff; see also Proverbs 31:3

⁴² 1 Kings 11:4

⁴³ 1 Kings 11:5-7

⁴⁴ see 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Judges 10:6

⁴⁵ CCC, #2113

⁴⁶ Deuteronomy 17

⁴⁷ see Psalm 1:1-2

found in Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. The large figures in salvation history are not important just for what they accomplished in history, hundreds of years before Christ, but in the legacy they left us through their written prayers and literature. The Book of Ecclesiastes is attributed to Solomon and it speaks of profound repentance and regret. Solomon recognizes that it might be too late to save the Kingdom, but perhaps not too late to save himself:

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered. I said to myself, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine -- my mind still guiding me with wisdom -- and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man's delight. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what he has already done. Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness; and yet I perceived that one fate comes to all of them. Then I said to myself, "What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For of the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise man dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.⁴⁸

This is a profound recognition of the emptiness of all the things of the world from someone who had it all. Satisfaction is not found in earthly pursuits but in God alone.

⁴⁸ Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:14

Material goods can be a great gift from God for the good of ourselves, and the People of God, but only if they lead us to God rather than away from Him. We need to be single-minded in seeking the one thing that we were created for, God Himself. The good things of this world will only satisfy if they lead us to a deep union with God. Apart from Him they are a vanity of vanities. As the great Doctor of the Church, Saint Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in Thee.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I, i