

## **1 The Story 8; Solomon to the Division of the Kingdom Kings, Wise and Foolish**

**Figures in red relate to power point slide presentation**

**2 Recap;** We are tracing through the Bible in one year together, little by little. **2.1** These talks of mine on Sundays are pointers to the deeper meat which will need to be chewed on by you individually. To help, I am continuing to put daily notes up on our website, which this week just finishes Isaiah. You will understand that I can't do in as much detail as the weekly notes what I am doing on Sunday, so if I miss your favourite story, go to the notes and have a look there.

**2.2** The overarching story we are following is of a God who is a risk-taker, an adventurer, relating to man, who has rejected him, but to whom He has made an **2.3** unbreakable promise, a covenant, held by an inviolable obligation, summed up in the Hebrew word *chesed*, to embrace all of the nations of the earth through the descendants of his friend, Abraham. **2.4** They have refused to listen to God as a nation, but God continues to speak to them through prophets. They have also rejected God's rule over them, and **2.5** opted for a king, which they have been promised will cost them dearly.

Last time, **2.6** we looked at the characters of Samuel, Saul and David, and we saw that the key to their success or failure was their ability to listen to and act on the voice of God in their lives. Saul was rejected, David was beloved because of their heart towards the Lord. We are very much continuing that theme as we move on to the reign and the decline of Solomon, and the subsequent sad course which Israel took, resulting in division, separation and sin on a national scale.

### **3 Solomon, man of Peace (Read 1 Kings 3. 2 - 28)**

Solomon comes to the throne around 971BC, beating off an attempt by David's third son, Adonijah, who has himself proclaimed king while David is still on his deathbed. But Bathsheba, the wife David stole from Uriah, whom he had killed, has been promised their son, Solomon would be king.

David confirms Solomon as King, and Adonijah is at first spared, but later, when he asks for David's former concubine in marriage, he is liquidated, as is Joab, David's rogue general, and Abiathar the priest

who supported Adonijah is removed from the priesthood and sent away.

Because Solomon is a man of peace, - his name *Shlomo* means *His peace* – rather than a man of war, as his father David was, he will be the one to build the Temple, the permanent worship centre for the people of Israel which has up until now been mobile in the Tent of Meeting.

#### **4 A Listening Heart**

The Lord then, in our reading, appears to Solomon in a dream and speaks to him, promising him a gift to help him to reign. Solomon's request pleases God greatly, and I want us to home in on what Solomon asks for, because once again, the tyranny of English translation keeps us from the depth of the Hebrew language.

In 1 Kings 3. 9, Solomon, acknowledging his dependence on God for everything, asks in Hebrew for a **Lev Shomea'** – most English translations have as translation, understanding or wise. But the Hebrew means 'a listening heart'. A heart that hears God. The word 'wise' and 'understand' doesn't appear at this point – what Solomon asks is to be able to listen to the Lord, something in the core of his being which has channels open to the Lord's voice. And it is this which so delights the Lord. Because of that, in v.12, God gives him a 'wise and understanding heart', but that is the by-product.

So much of our modern lives are a quest for knowledge and information – 'knowledge is power' someone said. We spend so much time talking, reading, discussing, teaching, but how much time do we spend just listening to the Lord? I am afraid that if I counted up the hours spent this year in meetings, in discussions, in conversations, they would far outweigh the time I have given to listening to the Lord, and I say that not out of a sense of guilt, but out of reality and somewhat out of frustration. I wonder how much more fruitful my work would be if I spent less time talking and more time to listen to the Lord? Especially since I am so aware of His desire to be with me.

We'll come back and consider that more later. One other thing to say is that in the Hebrew understanding, wisdom, *chokmah* is not about a body of experience or knowledge that you possess. It is about what you know resulting in how you live – it is doing, action

not intellectualism. This is why it is so valuable, because it leads to fruitfulness in life and the experience of God's blessing.

This is a short quote from a Catholic mystic, Saint Faustyna, who had a great impact on the life of the late Pope, John Paul 2, on this theme of listening to God; this is what she heard Jesus say to her as she listened to Him; *When you reflect upon what I tell you in the depths of your heart, you profit more than if you had read many books. Oh, if souls would only want to listen to My voice when I am speaking in the depths of their hearts, they would reach the peak of holiness in a short time. (Diary, 584)*

**5** Because of his listening heart, Solomon is given legendary wisdom; the story of the two prostitutes and their child is a sign of this. The Queen of Sheba comes later to question him and finds there is no one wiser in the known world than him.

### **The Temple**

**6** Solomon now sets to work fulfilling his father, David's plans to build a house for the Lord. It is on the same basis as the tent, with outer courts, where the altar and wash basin lie, then a central structure where the priests serve alone, divided with a veil into the holy and the most holy place, the most holy place being where the priest goes once a year to atone for Israel's sins.

**7** But this house is to be out of the ordinary. It is lavish in the extreme, using cedar wood from Lebanon, traded with the King of Tyre. Everything is overlaid with gold, and the place is stunning. The ark is finally brought from the old tent of David, where it has been left, to be installed behind the curtain. And then there is a worship festival which brings the nation together in dedication, described for us in both 2 Chron. 6 and 1 Kings 8. At this dedication, thick with the blood of sacrifice, the presence of the Lord, the glory of the Lord comes.

**8** Chris a few weeks ago referred to the word attached to the glory of the Lord, which in Hebrew is *kabhad* (Heb כְּבוֹד ) and said it means weight, or we might say, *gravity*, and that weight comes, that fire comes, and it condenses the air around it into cloud, and covers the Lord. But the **gravity of God's presence** makes it impossible for the priests to stand to serve (1 Kings 8.10-11) There is, then , a

gravity of God's presence which stops us from all our stuff – an abiding memory for me is in 1973, in the days of the four day week and mandatory power cuts, a meeting at my home church, in the old weather-board chapel, by candlelight, God's presence came, we sat in silence for maybe half an hour, just because of that gravity. So we have listening hearts, we have the gravity of God's presence – these are the places of encounter with Jesus Christ, which we seem to be so slow to embrace....

### **A Problem...**

**9** However, there is one thing worth mentioning here, which needs to be said, as it presents a problem.

Although the Lord had commissioned the Tabernacle in the desert and given Moses minute details of how it should look and function, down to the measurements, the same was not true of the Temple. It's really important to see that the Temple was the desire of David to provide a house for the Lord. But the Lord does not commission it; the Lord accepts it, and comes there, but the Lord makes it clear to David in 2 Sam 7.6,7 that He doesn't need a building, for a building cannot contain Him. The Lord repeats this later through the words of Isaiah 66.1 *Heaven is my throne; the earth is my footstool. What kind of house could you build for me? In what place will I rest?*

Notice from this that God asked for something mobile, but man wants to build Him something permanent. It's notable that the Temple becomes known as Solomon's temple, the work of this one king, a monument to a man. But God's purpose stays mobile, missional and global.

We must be so careful not to concretise God into our structures. God meets with us in the mobile revelation of His gravity, His weight of glory, but that is not limited to any human structure or tradition or even theology. What does that say about the church today? And what does it say about the nature of God's developing purposes not being tied to our need for significance?

### **Solomon's Witness in Words**

Although the Temple has passed away, there is a lasting witness to Solomon's life and witness in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. **10** He also wrote one of the Psalms, Psalm 127, the first verse of which is our city's motto – *nisi dominus frustra*, unless

the Lord's build the house, the builders' work is futile. So Solomon's words reach to us even today.

Looking at the Proverbs, we come to a goldmine of wisdom. In Hebrew, they are called *meshalim* (Heb מִשְׁלִים) which comes from a root meaning to govern or to rule. In other words, the proverbs are governing principles, for the right conduct of life. In them, Solomon exalts wisdom as greatly desirable, seeing it as a beautiful woman, an image Solomon would have greatly appreciated. I have spent a long time in the notes looking at these, so I won't dwell on them here. Not only Solomon, but others, such as Agur and Lemuel contribute to this book, and I will just highlight the Proverb in 9.10 – *The fear of the Lord is the source of wisdom*. That is, the only starting point for fruitful living is taking seriously the awesome nature of God's being and character, which results in living in vital relationship with Him. As someone said, speaking of Hebrew wisdom, for the Jew, it is impossible to know about God and not worship Him and live in awe of Him. For so many in the Greek tradition, knowledge about God may have no effect on our lives.

### **Song of Songs**

**11** Solomon was besotted with the female form. We will look at the shadow side of that in a moment, but the positive result is a wonderfully erotic and poetic handling of human sexual love, which David Pawson many years ago recommended that every bridegroom quote from to his bride on their wedding night.

At the end of the glorious love-song, which, if you haven't read, you need to go now and do, Solomon speaks of the power of human love, reflecting the divine covenant, when he says,

*Always keep me in your heart and wear this seal to remember me by. The passion of love bursting into flame is more powerful than death, stronger than the grave. Love cannot be drowned by oceans or floods; it cannot be bought, no matter what is offered. (8.6,7 CEV)*

### **Lust Deafens the Listening Heart**

**12** The shadow side of this emerges, however, in the way in which Solomon allowed his listening heart to be overshadowed by his lusts. It starts early in his career, in 1 Kings 3.1, when he takes to wife the daughter of Pharaoh of Egypt to seal a political alliance.

The Scriptures are explicit about Solomon's issues – in 1 Kings 11.3-8; the women, all one thousand of them, (seven hundred princesses and three hundred mistresses or unmarried partners) turned his heart away from God. Solomon is as good as a sex addict, we might say. He collects wives like others might collect jewels or gold.

**13** And in 11.9, we see that the Lord is angry because Solomon's heart, that listening heart, is no longer listening to God and begins worshipping the gods of his foreign wives. It is subverted, given over to pleasure and desire, and betraying the Lord who had brought him to influence. It is now that heart, as Jeremiah calls it, 'deceitful and desperately wicked beyond all things, who can understand it?' (Jer. 17.9)

Something is clear from this terrible outcome for this blessed king. No matter how spiritual, no matter how holy, how gifted the man or woman, it is possible to be turned from the way of the Lord to the ways of destruction. When we look through the Scriptures, we should be warned that mighty men and women of God make the most stupid mistakes, blindingly simple errors which throw their lives off track and God's purpose for them into dead-end streets. So Abraham and Sarah produce Ishmael, Moses murders the Egyptian, and later strikes the rock in anger, David takes Bathsheba and kills Uriah, Samson's lust destroys his ministry, and so on. And yet, we don't learn from this. No doubt Solomon was still going to the Temple and worshipping the Lord while all this idolatry was going on.

The upshot in 1 Kings 11.11 is that Solomon's heir will lose the support of most of Israel, and be left with a stump, Judah and Benjamin. What Solomon has started through his pursuit of false gods will become endemic in the whole nation, and will end in its miserable expulsion from the land. It is a fearful outcome.

### **Ecclesiastes**

**14** There is one more book in the Scriptures which is attributed to Solomon. It is obviously written towards the end of life, and it is full of solemnity and seriousness. The book of Ecclesiastes, called in Hebrew, *qohelet*, or gatherer-preacher, is a heartfelt sigh over the nature of the life lived without God.

The one thing which recurs throughout, is Solomon's realization that life is transitory and brief. In old versions of this book, the preacher

cries out 'vanity, vanity, all is vanity', but the word in Hebrew is much more poignant than that – it is the word *chebhel* (Heb חֶבֶל) which means *breath*. It is the same word as the name of the second man born on earth, whom we call Abel, but whose life was cut short so cruelly by his brother. We might use the word *ephemeral*, lasting just a day – but what Solomon is mourning is the shortness of life and the futility of it without God, like a flower here today, gone tomorrow. This is why, in the last famous chapter 12 of the book, he tells the young people to remember their creator while they are young, before they get to the stage of old age, and they find they have missed His grace and provision which bring true meaning.

What we learn from Solomon's life is the need for grace, the need to see that we cannot move an inch from listening to the Lord. Like Solomon, thousands have made shipwreck of their faith by following the lusts of their sinful nature. Without God's sustaining grace and a sense of my own need, even next week I could fall into gross sin and make a tragedy of the life He has given me.

**15** There is a prayer, the Jesus prayer, an ancient simple prayer which is the prayer of the tax collector in Jesus' story – it says, 'Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' Each time I pray it, I realise my utter need of grace and my deceptive heart. It is so easy to fall into the trap of saying 'I thank you Lord that I am not like other men..' when actually, I am exactly like other men....

### **The Kingdom Divided**

**16** When Solomon dies, his son Rehoboam takes the throne. Rehoboam sets out his covenant for his people, but instead of listening to the advice of the experienced older men of the court, he listens to the hothead youngsters who advise him to rule even more fiercely than his father. His ignoring the wise advice of the seniors results in ten tribes of Israel leaving him, and seceding from the kingdom. They follow instead a man called Jeroboam, one of Solomon's ministers of works, who has already been told by the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh that he will rule part of Israel. A new northern kingdom rises, called Israel. The south remains as Judah.

**17** A terrible thing now happens. In a politico-religious move, Jeroboam forbids the northern tribes from going to the Temple at Jerusalem. Instead, he has two golden calves cast, one at Dan in the

north and the other at Bethel in the Ephraim hills, bordering Judah. 'Here are your gods who rescued you from Egypt!' (1 Kings 12.28) We need to see something very key here – this is the first time the state has subverted the worship of the Lord to its own ends. And it won't be the last. Whenever the people of God allow themselves to be dictated to by the state, it compromises their prophetic testimony to the Lord's uniqueness. It happened in Nazi Germany in the 1930's, leaving the confessing church to stand against the church of the Reich. It is in danger of happening again today in the state churches of the western world. But the Lord will not leave it so. He has his purpose, and in 1 Kings 13.1 a Judean prophet tells Jeroboam at the Bethel shrine that God will destroy this false worship through a King named Josiah – as a sign of this word, the altar splits and the ashes on it spill out.

### **In Conclusion**

**18** What does this leave us to reflect upon

- **18.1** First, our need of a listening heart, a lev shomea'
- **18.2** Second, our need to see our own self-deception, to say Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner. We are not less likely to stray than Solomon or David, Peter or Moses. Are we aware of our own brokenness and lust? – as the hymn says...  
O, to grace how great a debtor/Daily I'm constrained to be,  
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,/Bind my wandering heart to Thee.  
prone to wander, Lord I feel it,/Prone to leave the one I love,  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it/Seal it for Thy courts above
- **18.3** Third, our need for oceans of God's grace and gravity. We are in this for the long haul. If we trust our own ability, our own wisdom, we will fail. We can only do this carried by His love for us, His forgiveness and His mercy. Are we looking for the gravity of His glory, or are we leaning on the balsawood base of our fickle souls?
- **18.4** Have we reconciled to the ephemeral nature of this life, and the need to know our creator intimately for its every moment, or are we just living for the moment, letting pleasure be our aim, dodging the inevitable future of our mortality?
- **18.5** Are we journeying with the mobile God or are we settling with our own temple-buildings, our rituals and traditions? Are we boxing God in?

Let's come to Jesus Christ this morning, who calls us to His cross and to His grace. Let's pray for one another around this table, knowing

we come 'poor, wretched, blind' to Him today, but looking for the gravity of His glory to encounter us here as we worship.