

Day 147

Solomon's Decline

1 Kings 11.1 – 40

Just as with his father David before him, his eye for a beautiful woman is Solomon's *achilles' heel*. He has an incredible seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (women who are dependent on him, but with whom he has not made a marriage vow; today we would call them mistresses.) In anyone's book, today Solomon would be seen as a sex addict.

And the women are not just the lovelies of Israel; we have already read that his first wife was an Egyptian. These women, we are told in verse 3, deflected his heart from the Lord. As he grows old, he starts becoming more 'multi-faith', even acknowledging Molech, the disgusting child-eating idol of the Ammonites. (v.7)

God now responds; Solomon, who has received so much blessing from the Lord, has walked away from the *chesed* of God because of his weak sexual will. God will therefore not allow his descendants to inherit the whole kingdom, yet because of His promises to David, God will still leave a remnant of the kingdom with the line of David. (v.13)

We are told of God's now raising up enemies against Solomon; it is significant that both Hadad and Rezon were quelled during the time of his father David, but now, because of Solomon's faithlessness, they return to trouble Israel.

But the main character to note in this chapter is Jereboam, son of Nebat, who is actually a Jew, of the tribe of Ephraim (also referred to as the tribe of Joseph, because Ephraim was one of Joseph's two sons adopted by Jacob-Israel.) Jereboam is a minister to Solomon in charge of the Ephraimite workforce.

He is met one day by the prophet Ahijah, from Shiloh, the old worship-centre where the old tent of meeting still resided. Ahijah takes his coat, and tears it into twelve, and gives Jereboam twelve of the pieces, prophesying that the Lord will give him ten of the tribes of Israel to follow him as king. There is a promise of an enduring dynasty if Jereboam will follow the Lord.

Solomon, hearing of this pretender to his throne, seeks to liquidate him, but Jereboam takes refuge in Egypt until Solomon's exit from the stage.

It is so sobering to see that a man as wise and as seemingly godly as Solomon finds himself in this fallen state. It is a warning that as we grow more comfortable, we grow more complacent and with complacency comes laxness in spiritual things. We must learn from Solomon's sad outcome, to remain faithful to the Lord over the long haul.

Day 148

Ecclesiastes, The Preacher

The book of Ecclesiastes is a personal favourite of mine. It is the distilled thought of a man who has experienced life, even who has let go of God, but who sees how futile life without God really is. It is also the book which above all recognises the speed with which life passes – in a real sense, it is the book of the late-middle-aged man! (Hopefully not grumpy old man!) It belongs to the compendium of wisdom literature, along with Proverbs and Job, the books of experience which help make sense of the jumble of life.

Ecc. 1.1

The word Ecclesiastes means precious little to modern English speakers. It comes from the Latin word meaning ‘preacher’ or ‘churchman’, and in Hebrew is *qohelet* (Heb קהֹלֵט) This is from a root word meaning to gather or congregate, so it is ‘the one who assembles or gathers’. The teaching is from one who has pulled together an assembly to address. The word also refers to the assembling of Israel together at times of national festival or emergency.

The Meaning of Life?

Ecc. 1.2 - 3

The Authorised Version translation, good for 1611, does not help us get to grips with the meaning of the word which recurs through Ecclesiastes, ‘vanity’. In Hebrew, the word is *hehvel* – pronounced *hevvel* (Heb הֶבֶל), basically meaning ‘breath’. It is the name of the second-born son of Adam and Eve, whom we know as Abel, giving us an insight into the transitory nature of life. The Greek-derived word *ephemeral* would probably render it better; the Preacher is highlighting the fleeting nature of our relatively short stay on this planet, and asks what in the end is the lasting outcome.

When we put this in the context of an aged Solomon, given his decline and his waywardness, we can understand his cry.

Ecc 1.4-11

The preacher points out the constant cycle of the seasons and the elements, and dismisses the idea that anything humans do is really original. In the light of experience, the writer sees a real perspective on life which reflects the minute place of each creature in the world overall.

Ecc.6.10-12

The preacher makes it clear that however significant we think we are on the planet (and Solomon is one of the more significant lives who has been recorded) we are actually part of a great procession of existence which pre-exists and outlasts us.

The Search for Meaning

Mortality Ecc 3.18-22; 2.12-16; 9.1-12 ; 8.16-17

Death, said someone, is a great leveler. All creatures die, human or animal, wise or foolish, righteous or wicked. The poison which has invaded men's beings is a killer, and the shards of darkness in us have given us only a terminal prognosis.

Life, meanwhile, is precious. 'a living dog is better off than a dead lion!' (9.4) For this reason, we are to be grateful for this amazing gift of life which we enjoy – and enjoyment is recommended by the preacher – of life, of wife, of work, for it will come to an end.

The message is, however we try and cheat death, it is a certainty, and we need to live life to the full.

In 8.16,17, in the midst of what seems quite a nihilistic philosophy, the preacher acknowledges God's action in it all. God is involved, is there, even though we can't work Him out. This is the reality of God, a mystery beyond understanding, yet a key to the meaning of life.

Day 149

The Apparent Meaningless of Human Pursuits

Ephemeral nature of Human Wisdom Ecc. 1. 12-18 Solomon muses over the passing nature of life, calling the pursuit of making sense of it a *grasping for the wind* (Heb. רִיף רָעוֹן *ra'yon ruach* the word *ra'yon* from root meaning to strive for, to be yearn for.)

Solomon also emphasizes the burdensome nature of understanding – 'with wisdom comes much sorrow, the more knowledge, the more grief.' (v.18)

Emptiness of Pleasure and Achievement Ecc 2.1- 11 This man has lavished on himself experience of life, but has not found meaning in its living alone.

Emptiness of Labour Ecc. 2. 17- 26 The preacher despairs over the futility of man's labour, until he recognises that meaning is tied up in God's purpose for him (v.24, 26) Without God, there is nothing to be gained in living.

Emptiness of Human Condition Ecc. 4.1- 6.9 The preacher here covers the futility of loneliness and the benefits of being in relationship (4.7-12) and the foolishness of having wealth believing that it will protect one from trouble (5.8-20) One of the classic quotes from the preacher is found in this passage in 5.15, that is, we arrive naked from the womb, and we depart naked, with nothing with us.

Benefits of Hard and Good Times Ecc.7.13-14 There is something to be gained both in hardship and trial if we stop trying to protect ourselves with things. God has provided good and bad times to temper us.

Emptiness of Human Power and Politics 8.2- 15 However much men scheme to make a good life for themselves, the power that be can intervene to shake up our lives. Injustice

occurs, the poor are oppressed, the powerful do what they want. Again, without God, all is futile.

Day 150

The Value of Wisdom

The Sayings of the Teacher Ecc 12.9-10 The teacher is not there to complain about everything and make life hard; he is imparting knowledge which will enrich life, and point people to God.

Various Proverbs Ecc. 7.7 – 26, 10.1 – 11.6

‘The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride’ – it is good to finish what we started. (7.8)

‘There is not a righteous man on earth ..who never sins’ (7.20)

In these passages, wisdom is exalted, foolishness is derided and sin is seen as a trap.

‘Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle at night, for you don’t know which will succeed, or whether both will do equally well.’ (11.6)

Wisdom is a Goad Ecc. 12.11, 12 The sayings of the wise are depicted as a goad, a nail driven through a piece of wood, which would be used to prick an animal that was being obstinate. In this we recognise that wisdom is not always positively received in its first appearance, but will move us forward. There is also a comment on the folly of just being a book-reader or writer, without experience of life.

The Formative Nature of Sorrow Ecc.7.1-6 Although we shun sorrowful experiences, the preacher tells us that sorrow is very formative, and being at a funeral is more instructive than being at a party.

Extremism Ecc. 7.15-18 The preacher urges to moderation – ‘the man who fears God will avoid all extremes’.

Few Choose Wisdom Ecc. 7.27 – 8.1 While few look for the way of wisdom, those who find it are changed in heart and expression.

Day 151

Life’s True Meaning Ecc 3.1 – 17

This is one of the best known and most quoted passages in Ecclesiastes. It has inspired many songs, contemplating the meaning of life. The preacher states that there is a season and a ‘right time’ (Heb עֵת *eyt*) for everything that is part of life. He is celebrating the full experience of being human, the sense of purpose in the heart, upon which, he says, God has written ‘eternity’ and yet we cannot fully fathom that concept, even though it is

woven into us. (3.11) When God is included in the equation, He brings sense and meaning to all things. (3.17)

Advice to the Young Ecc 11.7 – 12.8

The preacher has instruction for those young in years; they are to be aware that life is short, and to value the blaze of youth which is theirs. During these times, it is necessary to develop the relationship with the Creator (12.1) so that there is an anchor in the spirit when the days of decay set in, when sight fails, so that sun and moon are not seen clearly, (12.2) , when the teeth wear out (12.4) and sleep is short (12.4) , when sexual desire wanes (12.5) and the mind weakens (12.6). Thus there will be a character strong enough to maintain a walk with the Lord, which will see through the times of age.

Life's Meaning is in God Ecc. 12.13,14

God is the key, and there will be a reckoning for all of life's actions. Man's call is to keep God in the frame, so that life does not become futile, but a rich experience of wisdom.

Solomon's Reign ends (c.931BC) 2 Chron.9.29 – 31 (mirrored in 1 Kgs 11.41 – 43)

Solomon dies, having reigned for forty years, with records kept by the prophets Nathan, Iddo and Ahijah. He is succeeded by his son, Rehoboam.

Day 152 The Divided Kingdom (c.930 – 725BC)

In this adventure of God with the Creation, the Lord's scope for manoeuvre seems ever decreased by the wayward and toxic behaviour of His chosen people. Having seen a spark of light with the hopeful reigns of David and Solomon, the latter's unfaithfulness has led to a response from God which will break down the power of the Davidic throne, and will lead eventually to the exile of the people, to give the land a break from their idolatry.

Yet God never abandons His promise to Abraham throughout, and is moving inexorably towards wholesale and irreversible redemption of the creation in a feat of inexplicable self-sacrifice which will be accomplished through the Messiah.

In the midst of the horrible decline of Israel, there are those who still anchor themselves in this hope of the God who will rescue, and they look for that day and call Israel to turn back from their disobedience to await that deliverance – these are the prophets who will now be the lone voices of the Lord against the din of prodigal Israel's false worship of other gods.

The Division of Israel and Judah 1 Kings 12.1 – 33 (mirrored in 2 Chron 10.1 – 11.4)

With Solomon now dead, the people of Israel come to his successor to look for a new relationship between monarch and people. Solomon, with his temple and city building, made life hard for the people. They are now looking for some respite. The movement for change is led by Rehoboam, the man designated by God through the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite in 1 Kings 11, to be the one who will wrest the crown from Solomon's dynasty.

Rehoboam asks for time to consider, and takes counsel with his advisors. His older ministers counsel appeasement, a plan to win the people's heart and allegiance. The young bucks, testosterone running high, dismiss this as weakness, and urge Rehoboam to take tougher measures to put this rabble in their place. Three days later, Rehoboam ignores the voice of experience and wisdom, and listens to the power-freaks, and loses the support of the majority of his subjects, leaving Rehoboam with just his own tribe of Judah under his rule. When the young king sends out his minister of forced labour, Adoniram, to bring things under control, he is stoned to death. The king in fear now flees to his capital and fortress at Jerusalem.

In fulfilment of Ahijah's word, Jereboam is now made king over the rest of Israel. When Rehoboam gathers Judah and Benjamin into an army to fight the usurper Jereboam, a prophet named Shemaiah warns them that what has happened is God's doing, and they are wise enough to disband and accept the new status quo.

The Idols at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12.25ff)

Jereboam now sets up his first capital at Shechem, in the territory of Ephraim, (modern-day Nablus) in the shadow of Mount Ebal and Gerizim, the hills of blessing and curses.

Jereboam now wants to ensure that Israel doesn't revert to Rehoboam's rule, and sees that in order to achieve this, he has to ensure that people no longer go to Jerusalem to worship. In a move of outright idolatry, Jereboam has two golden calves made and places one in Bethel and one in Dan, in the far north, where the Danites had already set up the idol of Micah to worship. 'These are the gods who brought you out of Egypt' Jereboam decrees, in an act of breathtaking rebellion against the rule of the Lord.

Jereboam also institutes his own, non-Levitical priesthood along with his own festivals, to keep the people from going to Jerusalem.

In The Aftermath of the Split 2 Chron.11.13 – 17, 1 Kings 13.1 – 32

As this horrendous unfaithfulness to the Lord bites in the new Israelite kingdom of Jereboam, anyone who has a heart to follow Adonai (YHWH), and in particular the Levites, who have been rejected by the usurper, flee to Judah, leaving their lands in Israel. This gives a boost to Rehoboam's diminished kingdom of Judah.

Meanwhile, there is a backlash in the new kingdom of Israel. A prophet from Judah stands up and prophesies against the altar at Bethel while Jereboam is there sacrificing on it. The man of God (Heb אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים *Ish elohim*) foretells of a King named Josiah, of the line of David, who will sacrifice the false priests on the altar of Bethel, and as a sign, Jereboam's altar will split open and all the ash spew out.

Jereboam reaches out his hand to order the arrest of the prophet, but as he does, his hand withers, until the prophet prays for his healing, which he receives. As this is happening, the altar cracks open and the ashes spill out, confirming the prophet's words.

King Jereboam, rather chastened, invites the prophet home with him for a meal, which the prophet refuses, for God has forbidden him to eat or drink, nor to go home the same way he came.

The sorry tale which now unfolds is a sign of how low Israel has sunk. A prophet of Bethel, the false shrine, lies and convinces the prophet from Judah that he has received a word from an angel of the Lord telling him to take home and feed the man of God.

While they are sitting at the table, the false prophet is seized by a word that because the Judean has disobeyed the Lord's instruction, he will not be buried in his family tomb. On the way back to Judah, the man of God is attacked and killed by a lion, who then just hangs around by the body, along with the prophet's donkey.

News of this comes to the false prophet of Bethel, and he goes and recovers the body of the man of God, miraculously not touched by the lion. He buries the body in his own tomb, and mourns over the loss of this true prophet, asking to be buried with him when he himself dies. He also confirms the word that the Judean prophet brought, saying that the Lord's word against the shrines of Bethel and Samaria will come true. It is a moment of terrible pathos in this awful story of apostasy.

In 1 Kings 13.32 we encounter for the first time a reference to the city of Samaria (Heb שִׁמְרוֹן *Shom'ron* meaning 'watchpost' from root word meaning to keep or guard, also taken from the name of the landowner *Shemer* from whom it is purchased) ; this will not actually be established until 1 Kings 16.24, when Jereboam's successor Omri moves the capital there, beginning a new chapter in the story around this symbolic centre of disobedience to the Lord.

Day 153

Jereboam's Disobedience Continues 1 Kings 13.33 – 14.18

Jereboam's subversion of Israel continues with his recruiting non-Levite priests to his shrines at Bethel and Dan, which is what will lead to his coming downfall.

When Jereboam's son becomes seriously ill, in desperation his wife is sent in disguise to Ahijah, the prophet who predicted Jereboam's kingship, at Shiloh where the tent of the Lord had been. But the Lord has told Ahijah that she is coming, and he speaks of terrible tragedy that is coming on their house because of Jereboam's idolatry. The prophecy is that this son will die, but he will be the only one that is buried because Jereboam and his house will be removed from the kingship – he has proved monumentally unfaithful to the Lord.

When the wife returns home, the boy dies.

Rehoboam Fortifies Judah 2 Chron.11. 5 – 12, 18-23

Meanwhile, Rehoboam in the southern kingdom of Judah fortifies his territories, and makes the towns strong enough to withstand anticipated sieges. He marries within his tribe, and his most beloved wife of the eighteen he has is Ma'acah, daughter of the late rebel Absalom. He also has sixty mistresses, taking after his father Solomon in his proclivity for sexual excess.

Rehoboam appoints one of his sons, Abijah, as heir apparent among his twenty-eight sons, and to ensure no rivalry, he appoints the others governors of cities in his regions, to give them some responsibility.

Rehoboam's Idolatry 2 Chron.12.1,14; 1 Kings 14.22-24; 2 Chron. 12.2-4 (mirrored in 1 Kgs 14.25); 2 Chron.12.5 – 13, 15; 1 Kings 14.30 (mirrored in 15.6)

Inexplicably, having strengthened his position wisely, Rehoboam now institutes the old deceptions of the Ba'alim and Asherahs, the fertility cults, even permitting male shrine prostitutes to operate at pagan temples. This results in an attack from Egypt on their southern borders, led by Shishak, in league with troops from North Africa.

A prophet, Shemaiah, comes to Rehoboam and highlights the disobedience of the nation which has led to this scourge coming on them. Because of this, the people repent and turn back to the Lord, and the Lord delivers them from destruction, although he allows them to become vassals of Shishak, as a lesson in how a foreign king will treat them much worse than the Lord.

Because of this, the treasures of the house of the Lord and the royal palace are taken by the Egyptian, replaced by lesser replicas in bronze by Rehoboam.

Death of Rehoboam, Accession of Abijah 914BC

2 Chr.12.16 (mirrored in 1 Kgs 14.31); 1 Kgs.15.1,2 (mirrored in 2 Chr.13.1-2)

Rehoboam's death and Abijah's accession occurs in the eighteenth year of Jereboam's reign.

War Between Israel and Judah 2 Chron. 13.2 – 21 (see also 1 Kgs.15.7b)

In a confrontation between Abijah and Jereboam, in which Israel outnumbers Judah two to one, Abijah stands and makes a bold declaration of faith in the Lord (YHWH) before renegade Jereboam. For only the second time in Scripture (the first time said by David in 1 Chron 28.5), God's people are described as the 'kingdom, or kingship of the Lord.' (Heb מַמְלַכָּה יְהוָה *mamlekhath Adonai (YHWH)*) Here Abijah is confessing Judah's reliance on the God of His Fathers, and owning their giving refuge to the priesthood of Israel, while he accuses Jereboam of apostasy and idolatry, bringing with them as talismans the golden calves.

In an attempted ambush by Israel, Judah cries out to the Lord, and He delivers them, sending Israel fleeing in fear. As a result, Judah captures three more fortresses, including Bethel. This is such a blow to Jereboam's prestige, that he is now in decline, and his family's undoing is set.

Abijah's Dubious Character and Death 911BC

2 Chron.13.21; 1 Kgs.15.3-5; 2 Chron. 13.22; 14.1a

Despite Abijah's confession before the battle, he repeats his father's mistakes. However, God maintains his faithfulness to the line for the sake of David, whose only major blot had been the plot to kill Uriah and take his wife Bathsheba.

Abijah dies around 911BC, to be succeeded by his son, Asa.