

How the Mighty Have Fallen

We have been traveling through the Bible story and have today arrived at the story of Solomon. In my opinion this is one of, if not the most, dis-heartening, disappointing, disturbing stories in all of scripture. The title for this story in our study materials is “The King Who Had it All.” That title doesn’t really do the story justice. If I were going to pick a title, I’d use the words of David, “How the Mighty Have Fallen.” This was his response upon hearing the news of the death of King Saul and Jonathan. David lamented over the fate of Saul who had been so blessed by God to be made Israel’s first king but who also made as king the tragic choice to make his blessings his god. Power, wealth, fame do not make for good gods. They are fickle and cruel gods that will bring their worshippers down with a mighty crash and abandon them to the pit of despair. “How the mighty have fallen.” David’s words for his sovereign, Saul are even more appropriate for his son Solomon. Has one ever fallen from greater heights; squandered greater blessing and opportunity; have sins of one man ever caused more suffering for a nation than the sins of Solomon, the son of David.

Growing up hearing the great Bible stories from our parents we are familiar with the story of Solomon, but usually only the highlights of his life, the early chapters of his story and what glorious chapters they are.

As a young king Solomon genuinely seemed to be a humble and reverent man, devoted to and dependent upon God. We see that in his response to God's famous offer to Solomon that he can have whatever he wants.

Solomon responds.

“LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

It was a wise and good prayer for such a young man to pray. Where did Solomon learn to pray like that do you suppose? Perhaps he had heard his father praying, like the prayer of Psalm 72 which was the last of David's psalms and is written for his son Solomon, the new king. “Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. May the mountains bring prosperity to the people the hills the fruit of righteousness. May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor. May he endure as long

as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. May he be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. In his days may the righteous flourish and prosperity abound till the moon is no more” (1-7).

God answers the prayers of the father and of the son. He rains down blessing upon blessing on the reign of Solomon, gives the young king unprecedented judicial wisdom, brilliant administrative skill, impressive engineering ability, engaging talent for writing music and poetry, a keen understanding of science and nature and an entrepreneurial golden touch that would rival King Midas himself. In only a few years of Solomon’s reign there is peace in the land of Israel, prosperity for the people of Israel and praise even from the nations surrounding Israel. The promises God made to Abraham, so long ago seem to have all been fulfilled in Solomon’s day.

Remember, God had promised Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the

gate of their enemies... To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—(Genesis 12:1-3, 17; 15:18-20).

Now listen to how the writer of 1 Kings describes Solomon's kingdom. "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy. Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life (1 Kings 4:20,21). Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind (10: 23, 24). The Queen of Sheba came to see if the worldwide reputation of Solomon's splendor was really true or exaggerated as she suspected, Her conclusion, "Not even half had been told me; your wisdom and prosperity far surpass the report that I had heard. Happy are your wives! Happy are these your servants, who continually attend you and hear your wisdom! Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king to execute justice and righteousness."

As much as anyone else, God was pleased with Solomon's reign, enough to come and dwell himself in the glorious temple that Solomon had built. At the conclusion of the dedication of the temple God makes a surprise appearance to officially dedicate the temple with his own divine presence.

“And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8:10,11).

Solomon responds with one of the most eloquent prayers in all of the Bible which concludes with these words.

“Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised; not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke through his servant Moses. The LORD our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors; may he not leave us or abandon us, but incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances, which he commanded our ancestors. Let these words of mine, with which I pleaded before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires; so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other.

Therefore devote yourselves completely to the LORD our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day” (8:56-61).

What a marvelous moment in time this is. What a majestic mountain has been ascended. What heights, what glory, what splendor! To be able to stand as God’s people basking in the glory and bounty of God’s presence and grace. Here is the zenith of God’s Story so far and oh that it could have stayed like this, but it did not. “How the mighty have fallen.” What happens next is a sad, sad chapter in the life of Solomon and all of Israel. Solomon the wise gets played for the fool. Solomon exchanges the blessings of worshipping God for the paltry alternative of worshipping God’s blessings. Solomon ignores, disobeys even blatantly defies the very commandments he previously had pleaded with Israel to keep.

There were clear commands in God’s law about what a king should do. In Deuteronomy 17 the law says the king must not acquire many horses for himself (which is a reference to having a large army), he must not acquire many wives for himself or else his heart will turn away, and he must not acquire for himself great quantities of silver and gold. This law was so important that the king was instructed to make a copy of it so that he could read it every day. Solomon was not unaware of the law but he was

unwilling to obey it. We learn in 1 Kings that Solomon accumulated for himself 1400 chariots and 12,000 horses (apparently an unusually large number), seven hundred wives and 300 concubines (definitely an unusually large number) and so much silver that the scriptures say silver was as common as rocks in Jerusalem! The Queen of Sheba testifies that Solomon's wealth surpasses that of any report she had ever heard.

Just as God had warned, this disobedience, especially his many wives, leads Solomon further and further away from God. "King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the Israelites, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods"; Solomon clung to these in love and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David. For Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not completely follow the LORD, as his father David had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for

Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods (11:1-7).

As Solomon gradually becomes more in love with his wealth and his women than his God, God decides to pay Solomon a visit. “Then the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods; but he did not observe what the LORD commanded. Therefore the LORD said to Solomon, “Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of your father David I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it out of the hand of your son. I will not, however, tear away the entire kingdom; I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen” (11:9-14). God concludes his message to Solomon by telling him that he is going to raise up three different adversaries against him who give him nothing but trouble for the rest of his reign, Hada the Edomite, Rezon and one of Solomon’s own servants, Jeroboam.

So there it is. Solomon becomes the best example of his most famous proverb. “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.” If Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes, then its not hard to understand why he wrote the most pessimistic book in all of scripture. Solomon’s story is a sad and bitter tale that reveals a stubborn truth about all of us really. Even when God’s blessings to us overflow we are still prone to grab hold of the gifts than the giver.

There are so many lessons for us to learn in this story. Perhaps most important is the irony that the greatest danger to faith in God may be the blessings of God. We can be tempted to center our lives around all God’s gifts to us rather than the God who gave them. We may have a hard time thinking that could happen to us because we do not see ourselves so extravagantly blessed as Solomon. But of course the truth is all of us in this room have more wealth than Solomon ever dreamed of having. How many chests of gold would Solomon trade to have indoor plumbing, electric lighting and the ability to control our heat and cooling within a few degrees? How many chariots and horses would he trade for even our used second and third vehicles that could still easily outrun his swiftest stallion. Which one of us has not traveled further in one day than Solomon did in an entire lifetime? With the click of a button we can order into our homes a command

performance of the greatest music by the greatest musicians in the world; at a moment's notice we can demand entertainment by any one of tens of thousands of performers and performances. "Oh, well everyone has these things." Really? Actually only a fraction of the people on this planet enjoy the wealth every person in this has. And that is merely the material blessings God has enabled us to have in our time and place.

What of the enormity of our spiritual blessings? All of Solomon's splendor and glory pales in comparison to the surpassing glory of the knowledge of Christ, not a glory hidden away in some holy room in the temple but a glory brightly on display shining out of our heart, a glory daily transforming us into the very image of God and testifying to us of a future, eternal glory that profoundly outshines anything this world may offer.

What does Solomon have in comparison to what we have been given by our father God and our Lord Jesus who in their great mercy have given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade... the salvation of our souls bought for us not by silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ, the lamb slain.

Solomon was blessed to live in the holy city of Jerusalem, but we are blessed far more to look for a New Jerusalem that will one day come down from heaven, a city with no need of sun or moon because the glory of God and the Lamb will be its light; and surrounding that city we look to a new Heaven and a New Earth, paradise restored where God once again dwells with his people and there will be no tears and no death and no pain for all things will be made new.

So you see, we are far wealthier than Solomon but I fear we are no less distracted. I fear we are just as preoccupied as Solomon was with our gifts more than the giver. Solomon was the king who had it all and foolishly lost it all because he forgot the source of his blessing. We have been given far more than Solomon ever dreamed of having, may we cherish all that God has given us, our material blessings, the blessing of our family, the blessing of the Church and more than all of this, a thousand times more, God's precious gift of Christ, his only son who gave his life that we might know his love. God help us if we neglect so great a gift.