

## **“A Wise King Builds a Temple”**

### **(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 85)**

1 Kings 2 – 8

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So Solomon becomes the third king of ancient Israel, following his father David and his grandfather-in-law Saul. For those of you keeping track, it's now the year 970 BC. Solomon inherits a country that, thanks to David, is mostly at peace. The only lingering trouble is internal, with a handful of individuals who had attempted an insurrection right near the end of David's life. One of those individuals is Solomon's brother-in-law Adonijah. Adonijah makes a second bid for power, in the guise of a desire to marry a woman who had served David, but Solomon sees right through it. He takes care of Adonijah, and others whom David had warned him about. Unfortunately that means that several people end up dead – Adonijah for one; Joab, David's former general, for two; and three years later a man named Shimei, for three. All were guilty of crimes that were deemed punishable by death. I wish it were the case that there wasn't so much bloodshed during times of transition from one political leader to the next. It didn't always happen that way in ancient Israel, but it did often enough. Nowadays, in our country, when there is a transition from one leader to the next there isn't bloodshed. At least, not *literal* bloodshed. There's another kind of killing, a verbal kind of killing, as candidates paint each other in the worst possible light. In some ways our society today is still just as violent as ancient Israel.

But once Solomon's opponents are out of the way, the land truly has peace. I mean, *real* peace. No wars, not even any rumors of wars. All those enemies that David had to deal with – even the pesky Philistines – have been subdued. Solomon literally has *nothing to worry about*. It was a time of peace and prosperity for Israel, a welcome respite from several centuries of nearly constant warfare.

Solomon turns his attention to the only nation worth worrying about, the mighty kingdom of Egypt to the south. His solution? Peace treaty. Establish peace with Egypt *before* it becomes a threat. To secure the treaty, he marries Pharaoh's daughter. Later, when he builds a palace for himself, he builds one for her too: a magnificent palace, outside Jerusalem, fit for a princess and a queen.

But in his early years as king, Solomon had a bad habit: he was worshipping at the “high places.” The Canaanites who inhabited the land before the Israelites offered sacrifices to their gods at “high places,” outdoor shrines set on top of hills throughout the land. Typically there would be a stone altar and a wooden pole, along with a cistern of water, possibly a stone table, and sometimes even a sacred

hall. There still stand today archaeological remains of some of these “high places.” People would bring their animal offerings to these shrines, and sacrifice them to their Canaanite gods. The laws of Moses had contained explicit instructions that the Israelites were to completely destroy all these high places, for the God of Israel was not to be worshiped at these pagan shrines. But the Israelites had failed to carry out those instructions fully; many high places still existed. We are told that Solomon sacrificed a thousand animals at one such shrine. But God appeared to Solomon in a dream one night when Solomon was at that shrine. To our knowledge, this was Solomon’s first real encounter with the living God. David had *taught* Solomon about God, but knowledge alone isn’t enough. You need to *experience* God. Otherwise, all you have is a dead religiosity, not a living faith.

All God said so Solomon was simply this: “Ask whatever you wish, and I’ll give it to you.” Imagine if God asked *you* that question. Imagine if God appeared to you and said, “What do you want? Anything. Anything at all.” God didn’t tell Solomon he would actually *give* Solomon whatever he wanted; he just wanted Solomon to answer the question. Maybe it was a test. God’s got a new king over Israel, who *ought* to know the difference between right and wrong, yet here he is, sacrificing on outlawed pagan shrines. What better place for God to find out what’s *really* in Solomon’s heart?

Solomon thanks God for his faithfulness. Then he says: “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.” (1 Kings 3.7-9) What a beautiful answer to God’s question, an answer wrapped in humility. Solomon asks God to give him *wisdom*. Not wealth, not power, not long life – *wisdom*. God is greatly pleased. “I will give you a wise and discerning heart,” God says, “so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have *not* asked for – both wealth *and* honor – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.” (1 Kings 3.12-13)

God is as good as God’s word. “Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else.... And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.” (1 Kings 4.30-34) What’s the first thing Solomon does after receiving this gift? He heads straight back to Jerusalem, to the sacred tabernacle; he goes to the Ark of the Covenant, containing the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, and he makes sacrifices to God Almighty there. No more high places for wise King Solomon. Worship belongs in the place that God had designated – and no other.

An example of Solomon’s wisdom: the famous story of the two prostitutes who bring Solomon a baby, each claiming to be its mother. Solomon orders that the baby be cut in two. The real mother cries out, “No, don’t – give the baby to the other woman!” – and at that moment Solomon knows which of the two is *truly* the baby’s mother. He awards the child to the merciful mother.

The land enjoys an extended peace. No war, no violence, no corruption. From the Egyptian border in the south to the river Euphrates in the north – the largest stretch of land Israel *ever* possessed – there is peace. Happiness, prosperity, safety, throughout the land. There is a wise king at the helm.

In the fourth year of his reign, Solomon embarks on an ambitious project: building a permanent temple in Jerusalem to the Lord God Almighty. Solomon's father David had wanted to do this, but God had told David to hold off and let his son undertake this task. For hundreds of years the people of Israel had been worshipping God in a portable temple made of fabric and wood. It's time to move from the temporary to the permanent. Solomon had a wonderful relationship with King Hiram of Tyre, to the north, in what is now the country of Lebanon. There were huge forests of cedar and juniper trees up there. Solomon says to Hiram, "I will buy trees from you. Lots and lots of trees. I will pay your workers. You name the price." Hiram welcomes the deal; they put men to work; Solomon sends 30,000 men up north to help with the chopping. The logs are floated down the Mediterranean coastline, and then hauled up to the high city of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, another 80,000 men cut high-grade stone in quarries, and the stone also gets hauled to Jerusalem. 70,000 men do the work of transportation. A hundred and fifteen years ago a whole lot of stone was hauled from farmlands *here*, to this spot in the city of Mason, to build this church. That was an impressive accomplishment that we still talk about with admiration – but it *pales* in comparison to what Solomon accomplished three thousand years ago in Jerusalem. The stone becomes the temple's foundation, and the cedar and juniper logs are constructed to form the temple itself. Imagine how *beautiful* all that freshly-cut wood must have looked and smelled! A great temple is built, three stories high, an opulent palace for the Lord God Almighty. The details are amazing. Many of the temple walls and furnishings were inlaid with pure gold. Two large cherubim were placed in the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was to reside. Doors to the inner sanctuary were made of olive wood and had carved images of cherubim, palm trees, and flowers, all plated with gold. There were bronze pillars capped with bronze capitals, decorated with carved images of pomegranates and lilies; there were carved images of cherubim and lions and bulls and palm trees and wreaths, all on moveable bronze stands with bronze wheels; there was a golden altar and a golden table and ten lampstands of pure gold; there were gold lamps and tongs and basins for performing the sacrificial offerings, and more – the finest of the finest, a temple fit for the worship of the Lord God Almighty. No more worshipping pagan gods at little shrines on hillsides. God is to be worshiped *here*, and here alone, at this magnificent temple, the new crown of Jerusalem.

We haven't spent seven years building a temple. We haven't quarried stone or chopped down massive numbers of cedar and juniper trees. We haven't carved images of cherubim or pomegranates in gold and bronze fixtures. We haven't utilized the services of nearly two thousand men. But we *have* spent a significant amount of time, energy, and money refurbishing *this* temple to the Lord God Almighty. A large number of people have contributed to the project, with volunteer time and generous financial contributions. Next week, we get to celebrate what we have accomplished.

It's time to dedicate the temple. It's time to dedicate *this* temple to the ongoing worship of the Lord God Almighty. Be here next week as we celebrate and dedicate *this* temple to the Lord our God.

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