

“The Rise and Fall of a Wise Man” (Part 1 of 3)

1 Kings 1-4; 1 Chronicles 28-29; 2 Chronicles 1

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Sometimes the world produces truly great men and women. People who bless and enrich, inspire and impress, give and lead, people who – it seems – touch the world with nothing but goodness. People talk about them, marvel at them, aspire to be like them. Sometimes, these great people *fall*. Sometimes, they fall spectacularly, in full view of the public eye, with front-page headlines in the national news. Teachers, coaches, pastors, presidents ... I can think of examples in every one of those categories, and more. Often what’s left behind, in the wake of the fall, is a mixture of feelings – shock, confusion, anger, disgust. Sometimes these spectacular falls hit a raw nerve in us, and we are left wondering, *How could this be? How could this person, that I thought I knew and trusted, do such things?*

We have a case like that in the pages of our scriptures. A good man, a wise man, a strong and capable leader, who had a spectacular fall. His name was Solomon. He was the third king of Israel; under his rule, Israel enjoyed the highest degree of peace and prosperity that it *ever* had; he was known internationally for his great wisdom; leaders from far away came to seek his counsel; he was the king that built the magnificent temple in Jerusalem, whose influence and legacy endures still some *three thousand* years later. Yet Solomon had a dark side, a shadow side, that proved to be his undoing.

The Bible gives us two different accounts of Solomon’s life and reign. There’s one version in the books of Kings; there’s another version in the books of Chronicles. These versions are similar, in many respects; yet they are also quite different. The version in Kings is brutally honest. Here he is, in all his greatness and grandeur; here he is, in all the sordid, messy details of his life. The version in Chronicles, probably compiled a couple centuries later, is cleaner. It’s like somebody came through and sanitized the story. Maybe they thought the sordid details weren’t appropriate for children, or for a religious text. Maybe they wanted to present an idealized image of this man to the world – because it’s easier, isn’t it, to deal with idealized images of people than the messy truth. We want to say that people are either “good” or “bad,” and yet we all defy easy categorization. Solomon did some truly great things, no question about it. He also went *wildly* astray – and everybody knew it. Everybody who was close to him knew it; everybody who goes to the effort to read the Bible today knows it. Solomon *fell*.

Contrast his father David. David had one major slip-up – that business with Bathsheba and Uriah. But he profoundly repented. He realized he had made a grave mistake, that he had let himself fall prey to temptation; he suffered the consequences, both in his personal life and in his private life; he

realized how wrong he had been; he allowed God to pierce his heart with remorse and shame; he made a full confession; he prayed fervently, asking forgiveness for his sin, and he never made that mistake again. Solomon didn't do *any* of that. Solomon didn't realize that what he was doing was wrong; there was no remorse, no repentance; he continued to follow the path of sin. The Bible records it all.

I have to be honest – I struggle with Solomon. I find myself experiencing a full range of feelings – admiration and respect, on the one hand; disgust and revulsion, on the other. How can one person be *so good* and *so bad* all at the same time? That's the critical question, isn't it, about the nature of humanity – we can be *so good*, and *so bad*, and none of us are fully one or the other. Isn't that true?

My hope is that there are some lessons that we can learn from Solomon. That there is something edifying for us, here and now, today. That somewhere in this crazy mixture of *wisdom* and *folly* we can learn something about how to be human – and how to deal with the reality of our *own* folly.

So, briefly: Solomon was one of the sons of David. He had a large number of siblings – three brothers, fourteen half-brothers, one half-sister, and maybe more, all offspring of David's various wives. The household was a mess; there was rape and murder and open rebellion among David's own children during his days as king. When David was old and dying, one of his sons made a bid for power. David summons his three most trusted advisors – prophet, priest, and military leader – and decrees that Solomon should be king. Solomon is given a mule to ride on, and an armed escort, and is anointed as king in a public ceremony with pomp and circumstance. Solomon's half-brother, the would-be king, backs down ... for a time. David dies, after passing on to Solomon two pieces of advice. First: "Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn." (1 Kings 2:3) That was the critical bit of wisdom that Solomon ultimately failed to heed. He did a better job following David's second piece of advice, which had to do with neutralizing certain troublemakers who would be problematic to Solomon's reign. 1 Kings spends nearly a whole chapter talking about that process – messy, unpleasant details that kind of leave a bad taste in your mouth, and that the book of Chronicles largely skips over. Then, Solomon establishes a treaty with Egypt, securing it by marrying Pharaoh's daughter. That virtually guarantees peace: nothing to worry about on either the domestic or international front.

The next thing we are told is that Solomon experienced a vision from God. He went to Gibeon, where there was an outdoor shrine, and he offered a sacrifice there. Apparently he did this often, because we are told that "Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar" (1 Kings 3:3-4). Now it's important to know that the practice of worshiping at these outdoor, hilltop shrines was forbidden, according to the law of Moses. Solomon *should* have known that. God appears to him in a dream while he's at this hilltop shrine. God says to him, "Ask what I should give you." Solomon praises God for his faithfulness, then Solomon admits his own fears about what it means to be a king. He asks God: "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." (1 Kings 3:9) "It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this," we are told (1 Kings 3:10); Solomon could have asked for anything – anything at all! – and he chose to ask for *wisdom*. That, in and of itself, is a mark of wisdom. God promises Solomon wisdom, *and* wealth, *and* fame, and even offers

him long life, *if* Solomon keeps God's ways. (1 Kings 3:14) Solomon awakes, returns to Jerusalem, and pays a visit to the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred chest containing God's law.

Solomon's wisdom becomes known when two prostitutes ask him to settle a dispute. Each of them had a child; one of the children had died; both of them claim the surviving child is their own. Which one is telling the truth; which one is lying? Solomon threatens to cut the baby in half and give half to each; one of the women says *no*, don't kill the baby but give it to the *other* one. Solomon awards the child to this woman. "She is his mother," he says. Whether that was *biologically* true, who knows, but that woman demonstrated compassion that the other lacked. The whole country marveled at this, "because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice." (1 Kings 3:28)

Solomon appoints administrators throughout his kingdom: priests, secretaries, a recorder; the commander of the army; various people in charge of the food supply, someone to oversee the palace, someone else to oversee the forced labor. Yes, I said *forced labor*. The Israelites, who had once been slaves in Egypt, now had slaves of their own, mostly prisoners of war, as was common practice in the ancient world. But the Israelites were happy and content. Their land was enjoying a tremendous amount of peace and prosperity. Solomon ruled an empire that stretched from the border of Egypt all the way to the Euphrates River, in modern Iraq – the largest extent of Israel's power, *ever*. Nations all around them were offering tribute. Solomon imported horses into Israel – horses were not native to Israel – and built facilities to hold *forty thousand* horses for all the chariots in his militia. This was like Egypt, back in the days of Moses; or a small version of the Roman Empire, in the days of Jesus – he could have been called "Solomon the Great." But unlike most conquerors and emperors, Solomon was known not for his power, but for his wisdom. "God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else.... He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom." (1 Kings 4:29-34)

Behold, my friends, the rise of Solomon. Wisdom, wealth, power, fame; peace and prosperity for the people. For the *Israelite* people, that is. Don't forget the tribute. Don't forget the slavery.

And, don't forget Solomon's sacrifices at those hilltop shrines. Ultimately, that's part of what will be Solomon's undoing. One verse in 1 Kings 3 captures the root of the problem: "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places." (1 Kings 3:3) Solomon's heart was divided. I think he earnestly *wanted* to be faithful to God. But he had a habit that wasn't right in God's eyes. If there's a lesson here in this early part of Solomon's reign, I think this is it: *loving God* isn't enough. *Wanting to be faithful* isn't enough. Walking in *some* – or even *many* – of God's statutes isn't enough. If you want to serve God, you need to submit the *whole* of yourself to God's will. If there's something you do, a habit you engage in, that isn't right in God's eyes – you need to do something about it, *now*. Because if you don't ... it could become your undoing.

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