

“The Rise and Fall of a Wise Man” (Part 2 of 3)

1 Kings 5-9; 2 Chronicles 2-8

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

February 4, 2018

“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) Sometimes there are good men, wise men, truly *great* men (or women); people who achieve great accomplishments, build magnificent structures or institutions that withstand the test of time, people who leave a lasting legacy ... yet, under the surface, behind the curtain, there’s something going on that is greatly problematic. We hear about these people in the news; the media always has a field day when a great person falls. Sometimes we encounter these people in the course of our daily lives: a family member, a friend, a co-worker, who suddenly turns out to be dramatically more complicated than what you thought, guilty of sins that you never imagined they would commit. We have this tendency to want to categorize people as either “good” or “bad” – yet the reality is that most of us are more complex than that; most of us defy easy categorization. Solomon, the third king of Israel, was such a person. He did some *truly* great things for Israel; he was renowned on an international scale for his wisdom; he built a lasting legacy that still leaves an impact on the Jewish faith and on Middle Eastern politics three thousand years later, and yet there was something going on in Solomon’s life under the surface, behind the curtain. This great, wise man was heading for a fall.

The question we are exploring is, what can we learn from someone like Solomon? How can *our* lives and legacy be different – *better* – because of what we can gain from knowing his story?

Let’s look first at what Solomon accomplished. Solomon resolves in his heart that he will do what his father David had not been able to do: “I intend to build a house for the name of the Lord my God.” (1 Kings 5:5) Solomon had built a mighty empire; nations from all around were bringing Israel tribute. Wealth was flowing; Solomon had resources to spare. He sends a trade proposal to Hiram, King of Tyre, north of Israel, where there were magnificent forests of cedar trees. Solomon offers to give Hiram massive amounts of wheat and oil in exchange for a large number of those magnificent cedar trees, which are chopped down, brought to the shore, floated down the Mediterranean coastline, then hauled up to Jerusalem. It took *ten thousand people* to do that job. Then Solomon had another *hundred and fifty thousand* men working in Israel’s hill country, quarrying stone and delivering it to Jerusalem. There, on the hill of Zion in Jerusalem, Solomon built a magnificent temple to the Lord God Almighty. The quarried stone became the foundation; the cedar trees became the walls; the temple, when completed, was 90 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 45 feet high, with three floors and a winding staircase, a wide front porch (30 feet wide by 15 feet long), massively thick walls, a variety of rooms on the sides,

and an inner sanctum, the “holy of holies,” where the Ark of the Covenant, the chest containing the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, was to reside. Artisans carved elaborate decorations on the doors and the walls, overlaid gold on just about everything, and constructed two fifteen-foot-tall olive wood statues of winged creatures in the holy of holies to cover the ark. In front of the temple, Solomon erected two large bronze columns, adorned with carvings of pomegranates and lilies; a massive metal basin for holding water, adorned with carvings of gourds, and resting on statues of a dozen oxen; ten huge bronze stands, ornately decorated with images of lions, bulls, and fantastic winged creatures; ten large wash basins; and a wide variety of instruments and utensils. Some of the objects were made from solid gold: an altar, a table (similar to a communion table), lampstands, and more utensils. All of that would be used in the sacrificial rituals that would take place every day at the temple, together with ornate decorations to accompany them. From start to finish, the project took seven years. It was an incredibly beautiful building, the ornament of Jerusalem, a marvel to behold, a fitting testimony to the grandeur of God. This temple and its accompanying practices endured *four hundred years*; it was destroyed, and rebuilt, and destroyed again; the site was captured and re-captured time and again; today, there is an Islamic mosque on the site where Solomon’s temple used to stand, and the closest the Jews can come to it is the western wall, the “wailing wall.” And who knows what the future will bring.

But that’s not all that Solomon accomplished. He built for himself a palace: 150 feet long, 75 feet wide, 45 feet tall – as high as the temple. There was a throne room – the Hall of Justice, where he would judge – and his own private residence, all made of cedar wood and the best stones. Solomon built a separate palace for his wife, an Egyptian princess. He built a wall around Jerusalem; he built or re-built several other cities, including cities to store grain and cities to house his arsenal of horses and chariots; he built a fleet of ships on the Red Sea, which he sent periodically to a place called Ophir – probably in Africa or India, we’re not sure which – to bring back massive amounts of gold and precious jewels. The scope of what Solomon achieved in twenty years is absolutely staggering. He accomplished all this through the use of slave labor: Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, the remnants of the various people who lived in Canaan before the Israelites did. Ironic, isn’t it, that these people who worshiped other gods were the ones responsible for constructing the temple to *Israel’s* God.

The other irony is that Solomon’s greatest legacy is that magnificent temple, for the worship of God ... while Solomon himself had a habit of worshiping at those hilltop shrines that God had forbidden.

That doesn’t mean Solomon was a complete hypocrite. That’s our tendency, isn’t it, to look at someone like this and call them a hypocrite. Part of us wants to demonize him, vilify him, diminish the *good* that he truly did do for the people of Israel. But the Bible doesn’t do that. There will be plenty of other kings later on that the Bible will say were just *bad*. Not Solomon. The picture we get is of someone whose heart was in the right place ... *most* of the time. When the temple was completed, Solomon offered up a marvelous prayer. “Lord God of Israel, there’s no god like you in heaven above or on earth below. You keep the covenant and show loyalty to your servants who walk before you with all their heart.” (1 Kings 8:22) Solomon knows that God wants us to offer God our *whole* heart. *Solomon knew what was right*. There’s really no question about that. The difficulty he had was that, for whatever reason, *he wasn’t able to offer his whole heart*. I think he *wanted* to. I think we *all* want to, don’t we; yet can any of us truly say that we *succeed* at that? The prayer goes on, and on; Solomon

proclaims God's greatness and asks for God's protection and blessing in a wide variety of circumstances that Israel might face, and he prays that God will give the people the will to do what is right. "May God draw our hearts to walk in all his ways and observe his commands, his laws, and his judgments that he gave our ancestors." (1 Kings 8:58) Solomon gets it, he really does; he *means* these words; he *knows* God wants our whole heart; he wants people to do that; *he himself* wants to do that.

But there's something going on under the surface, behind the curtain. We'll talk about this more next week, but Solomon had a thing for women. He had a beautiful wife, that Egyptian princess, yet she wasn't enough. There were other women. There were *lots* of other women. *Hundreds* of other women. Many of these women worshiped other gods, and Solomon began to worship those other gods too. This great man, who had such an incredible impact on the people of Israel, was heading for a fall.

So this is the paradox. How can this great man, this wise man, this man who *truly knows what is right and desires to do it*, fall prey to a vice which bring ruin to both him and the country he loves? We hear stories all the time of great people who fall. Solomon had a good and noble heart ... and *still* he fell.

When Solomon finishes all the work of building, God appears to him in a vision. God gives him a warning: "I have heard your prayer and your cry to me. I have set apart this temple that you built, to put my name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there. As for you, if you walk before me just as your father David did, with complete dedication and honesty, and if you do all that I have commanded, and keep my regulations and case laws, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever.... However, if you or any of your sons turn away from following me and don't observe the commands and regulations that I gave you, and go to serve other gods, and worship them, then I will remove Israel from the land I gave them and I will reject the temple that I dedicated for my name. Israel will become a joke, insulted by everyone." (1 Kings 9:3-7) It is a very clear, very stern warning: *Israel's future depends on your actions, and the actions of your offspring*. If you walk the straight and narrow road, everything will be great. If you don't, it will all fall apart, like a house of cards. We're not talking just about personal holiness here – *we're talking about the whole legacy that he's built*. That's the way of it, isn't it, when great men fall – they don't just destroy themselves, they destroy the very institutions that they have served and established. When they fall, they hurt a *lot* of people.

Our legacy may not be as great as Solomon's. Our impact on the world may not be so long-lasting. But we all have institutions that depend on us. The places we work, the organizations we support, the church we care about, the family that we raise. These institutions, these relationships, *depend* on us living our lives in a certain way. If we screw up – it impacts the world around us. If we *really* screw up – it *really* impacts the world around us. The bigger our screw-up, the bigger the *mess*, the bigger the *damage*. Solomon knew this, at some level. His prayers testify to that. And still, he fell.

What do we need to do that's *different* than what Solomon did? I want to leave you with that question, and invite you to ponder it over the coming week. Solomon's heart was in the right place; he was praying the right prayers – *yet it wasn't enough* to save himself, or his country, from destruction. What was missing? What did this incredibly wise man *fail* to do? What do *we* need to do differently?

© 2018 Rev. Bill Pinches