

6. Faithful God, Fickle People - Solomon's Glory and Disgrace: The tragedy of half-heartedness

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- [0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at 1 Kings 11, we'll have a moment of prayer. For God speaks still, His word is clear, so let us hear and do His will.
- God our Father, we are painfully aware when we read certain parts of your word that we are rather they were not in Scripture. And yet so often these are the parts that we most need to hear.
- And we pray, Lord, that these words spoken long ago may come to us in freshness and power, as a word not just to your ancient people, as a word to your people now, helping us to resist the tempting choice of doubting or delay.
- So open our ears to hear your word and open our hearts to obey it. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen. Amen. And so we come to our final study in the life of Solomon.
- I've called this whole series, Faithful God, Fickle People. And that's a good emphasis, I think, because if we try to build the kingdom of God on our faithfulness, nothing very much is going to happen.
- [1 : 25] And I've called this particular study, The Tragedy of Half-Heartedness. Solomon's tragedy here in chapter 11, The Tragedy of Half-Heartedness.
- It's a very melancholy experience, which many of you will have had, I'm sure, of visiting a building which was once full of life and vigor and movement and seeing it decayed.
- Perhaps it was a school you once went to. I remember seeing my old primary school being bulldozed in order to build a new school. I remember feeling just how desolate it was and remembering the noise, the life and the color that happened there at one time.
- But it's even more distressing when you come across an older person who once was very vigorous, perhaps an athlete, perhaps a film star, the kind of person who everyone envied at one time because of their good looks, because of their money, because of their prowess.
- And they have sunk into old age. They've gone to seed. They are riddled by drink and by decay. That is a tragedy.
- [2 : 37] But surely here in 1 Kings chapter 11, we have one of the greatest of all the biblical tragedies, the terrifying decline of Solomon.
- Those of you who were here last week will remember we looked at the high watermark of Solomon's life, his obedience to the word of God, his sense of the uniqueness of God who revealed himself through his word and in his temple, and the overall sense that this whole project was being drenched in prayer and in obedience.
- But surely this story is realism. T.S. Eliot once said, humankind cannot bear very much reality. And that's true because, as I said, we would rather in many ways this chapter was not in the Bible, but here it is.

Those who argue that Solomon's story is idealized, that he's a mythical figure whose importance has been exaggerated out of all perspective, don't know how to handle a chapter like this, because it's very clear we are dealing with fact.

No one, having built Solomon up the way he has been in the past chapters, would suddenly turn turtle and present this decaying and decrepit and discredited old man.

[3 : 54] That just doesn't make any sense. And also, some of the commentators idealize Solomon so much. Some evangelical commentators refuse to see anything wrong with him up to this point.

Now I've argued throughout this series that there are warning bells which ring right from the beginning. There have been loud bells that have rung.

For example, back in chapter 3 we learn he married the Pharaoh's daughter. Now here we learn in verse 1 the only way in which the Pharaoh's daughter was unique was in the eminence of her dad.

He married Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian and Hittite women. So Pharaoh's daughter was only the beginning. We learn that he failed to remove the high places, those places where idolatrous shrines were set up.

Now here he's not simply failing to remove them, he's creating other ones. We read about his extravagant lifestyle. We read about his building up of military power, his multiplying of horses.

[5 : 03] And pastorally, this is so important. You see, these guys who idealize Solomon think they're doing him a favor. But think about it for a minute. Suppose up to the end of chapter 10 Solomon had been absolutely wonderful, a spiritual giant, and then suddenly in chapter 11, without any warning signs at all, he simply departs and falls into apostasy.

Do you realize what that's saying? That is saying that you can go to bed one night walking with God and wake up the next morning an apostate. Now that would be terrifying, wouldn't it?

That would be absolutely pastorally disastrous. It never happens that way, and we know it never happens that way. Why did this happen?

Years of compromises, years of secret sins, years of lessening his obedience to the word of God. And one day, what looks solid, simply dissolved.

Just as a chair or a bench breaks, a bridge collapses. It doesn't collapse immediately. It collapses because of years and years of weakening, which haven't been attended to.

[6 : 16] So that's the situation we have here. This is the bitter fruit of years and years of compromise. I've often used, and I've been talking about Solomon earlier, words like springtime and summertime.

This is winter. This is bleak. This is desolate. I want to talk about three things as the chapter develops. First of all, Solomon's divided heart.

That's really verses 1 to 13. Then Solomon's divided kingdom.

Naturally, verses 14 to 28. And then I want to talk about God's undivided grace. Verses 29 to 43.

So first of all, Solomon's divided heart. Now one of the things you often find in the Bible, the Bible writers tend to do this. They set out their material very carefully so that you can see the beginnings and the endings of the section, the bookends, if you like.

[7 : 23] Now way back in chapter 3, verse 3, we read this. Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David. Compare that with 11, verse 4 here, the other end of the story.

For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods. And his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.

Now David, his father, sinned many times. Indeed, he sinned in technicolor. Think of the Bathsheba incident. But David also repented in technicolor.

There is no word here in this chapter about Solomon repenting. David never broke the first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me.

David's faith was expressed in the word of the Psalms, my help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. David's heart remained faithful to the Lord.

[8 : 28] David's heart also led him into sins of various kinds. But when compared with Solomon, he is faithful. So as we look at Solomon's divided heart, I want to mention two things.

First of all, the idolatry Solomon practiced. Now you'll notice that as throughout the Old Testament, adultery and apostasy are intertwined.

He had these foreign princesses as his wives. And verse 2 says, they will surely turn away your heart after their gods. And that happens in verse 8.

He did all for his foreign wives who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods. This is a painful story. Last week in chapter 8, what was Solomon saying?

The heaven and the highest heavens cannot contain you. You cannot put Yahweh God of Israel in a box. And now Yahweh is having to share space in Jerusalem with the likes of Ashtaroth, the fertility goddess.

[9 : 32] You see the difference. Yahweh is over and above everything. His power is great. Even the heaven of heavens cannot contain him. And now his temple is simply another chapel, along with all the other chapels there.

Ashtaroth, the fertility goddess. The perversion of the good love that God gives to men and women. Ashtaroth, the goddess of sex, the goddess of fertility.

A goddess who is hugely worshipped in our own day. You see, sex, sexual love is a good gift from God. When it becomes worshipped, it becomes an idol.

And it destroys lives. It destroys communities. It destroys families. We're not entirely certain who these gods, Chemosh and Milcom, were.

But they were all pagan gods. One of the words for pagan gods in scripture is the Hebrew word, Hevel, which means emptiness. A puff of wind.

[10 : 33] A projection of fantasies. That's what the pagan gods were. A projection of our fantasies. If I could project my sexual, my economic, all my fantasies onto the scale of the universe.

These are the kind of gods and goddesses I would come up with. And of course, this is all open for exploitation by Satan. Wherever there is idolatry, Satan is there.

Remember, Moloch, the abomination of the Ammonites mentioned in verse 7. A particularly nasty and vicious and depraved kind of worship where babies were sacrificed.

Remember Graham Kendrick's hymn, We have sacrificed our children on the altars of our gods. That was written as a protest against easy abortion. We may not set up temples to Moloch, the abomination of the Ammonites.

But there are so many things in our society that are tending in that direction. Now you can see, of course, how all this would be spun by Solomon's spin doctors. It wouldn't be spun as Solomon departing from Yahweh at all.

[11 : 40] This would be seen as broad-minded, multi-faith worship. You see, Solomon's become liberated. Solomon now realizes that all the truth doesn't come from the Torah, from the words of Moses.

Solomon is inviting all these gods and goddesses to share their insights. And it's so subtle, isn't it? Before ever the temple to Moloch was erected on the mountain east of Jerusalem, the temple to Moloch was erected in Solomon's heart.

That's where it begins. When he became old, his wives led him astray. So the idolatry set Solomon's practice. And secondly, the word that Solomon rejected.

Verse 2. From the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, you shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you.

You see, though, these are the words of Moses in Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7. The words which you may remember back in chapter 2, David had urged Solomon to obey.

[12 : 49] Obey the words of Moses. The kingdom will prosper and all will go well. That's not the prosperity gospel, of course. That's basically saying the kingdom will be built on solid foundations of integrity and of the word of God.

Now, Solomon probably still worshipped in the temple. It's very possible to obey the word of God outwardly without the heart being affected.

Isn't that so possible? We go through all the outward routines. We go through the routines of religion. But our hearts are unaffected. And in both testaments, it is the heart.

By faith, says Hebrews 11. By faith. If only Solomon had heeded his own words in Proverbs 4, verse 23. Above all else, guard your heart.

For it is the wellspring of life. That's Proverbs 4, verse 23. And remember, the heart in Scripture is you. What you are. What your priorities are.

[13 : 53] What the wellspring of your life is. And it's worse than that. Verse 9. The Lord was angry because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.

Appeared to him in the very early days in chapter 3. And then again in chapter 9, there's another appearance. And then we're going to have the ministry of prophets, as we'll see in a moment.

The divided heart that is going to lead to all kinds of disaster. But this divided heart, secondly, issues in a divided kingdom.

In chapter 4, we saw how the peace and prosperity of Solomon's early reign, when Solomon reigned in wisdom and in glory, reflected the ancient promises to Abraham.

For a brief period, the promises to Abraham that you'll occupy the land between the rivers Nile and the Euphrates, the so-called fertile crescent, as it used to be called by 19th century explorers, the land between the Nile and the Euphrates, Solomon effectively controlled that.

[15 : 02] But now the kingdom begins to disintegrate. As Solomon's faithfulness and obedience goes out the window, so the curses spoken by Moses as a result of unbelief and unfaithfulness begin to happen.

Now, just two things I want to say. It's quite a long passage, and I don't want to go into it in detail. First of all, the Lord controls history. Verse 14 and verse 23.

The Lord raised up an adversary. Now, these guys, Hadad and Rezon, are shadowy figures. They are both old enemies from David's time, as the story tells us.

And you will remember that David had handed to Solomon a kingdom, which Solomon didn't need to fight for, because the kingdom was so surely established by David's conquest. But now, as the king begins to lapse into this decrepitude, the vultures begin to gather, and the cracks begin to appear on the facade.

One in the southeast, and one in the northeast. And one of the fascinating things that you'll notice, one fascinating little detail about this, and later about Jeroboam, is these guys went off to Egypt and hobnobbed with the Pharaoh.

[16 : 20] Now, remember Solomon's marriage with the Pharaoh's daughter almost certainly was seen as a political coup. Marrying the Pharaoh's daughter, allied with the great power on the Nile, shows the futility of that alliance, because when it suited the Pharaoh, he simply turned his back on Solomon.

Pharaoh knew perfectly well that the once powerful kingdom was disintegrating, and so we have the daughter of Pharaoh married to Solomon, while Pharaoh cozies up to Solomon's enemies.

His political experience hadn't worked, in other words. The Lord controls history. But secondly, individuals make choices.

To say that the Lord controls history does not mean we are robots. It does not mean that we have no responsibility for what we do. And a more formidable enemy emerges in verse 26.

Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite of Zerudah, a servant of Solomon, whose mother's name was Zeruiah, a widow, also lifted up his hand against the king.

[17 : 30] And that phrase is significant. He lifted up his hand against the king. That doesn't mean that God was not in control of this situation, but it means that Jeroboam is taking a particular initiative.

Now if you read on in the book of Kings, this man's name is going to reverberate through the story. He is the man who is going to rule the northern kingdom, when the kingdom is torn apart.

And he is called by our author, Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. That's the epithet of Jeroboam.

He caused Israel to sin. And of course, there's a hint also of the north-south divide. In verse 28, we are told that the man Jeroboam was very able, and Solomon gave charge over all the forced labor of the house of Joseph.

House of Joseph tends to be used particularly if the northern tribes of the kingdom. So you can see what's happening. This able but bitter young man is already positioning himself for a situation he sees coming.

[18 : 44] And the divided kingdom is going to be a feature of the story from chapter 12. Interesting, the prophets never accept the divided kingdom. When they talk to the nation, they always talk to, even if they're talking to the north or to the south, they're talking to the whole people.

And the later prophets, like Ezekiel, look forward to the time when the kingdoms will be reunited. For example, Ezekiel 37, the famous passage about the valley of dry bones, goes on to use a metaphor of two twigs grafted together, which are the two kingdoms once again growing together.

The divided heart, which leads to the divided kingdom. Now, the divided heart had been there for a long time. But once this shows itself in all its horrific splendor, then the kingdom begins to disintegrate.

And things are never going to be the same again. Divides like the north-south divide are going to emerge. David kept the kingdom together by his sheer power of leadership.

Solomon held it together because people were happy. As you know, I mean, if people are perfectly happy economically and perfectly secure militarily, they tend to be happy with those who govern them.

[20 : 06] And so it was here. I'm not, of course, saying this is simply a political situation. What I'm saying is that the state of Solomon's heart manifests itself this way.

Now, that is a gloomy story. And we can't ignore it. We must face up to it. And we must see the seeds of this in our own hearts. In the compromises, in the little denials of the Lord, in the love of ease, and in the love of the world.

But there's more in this chapter. In this chapter, we have God's undivided grace. Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts.

And he knows all things, says the Apostle John. And that's really verses 11 to 13, and then again verses 29 to 43.

Can God salvage anything out of this mess? So often the Bible story comes to an impasse, doesn't it? First impasse is in the Garden of Eden.

[21 : 15] Can God solve, sort anything out of that mess? We have an impasse again with the Tower of Babel. Can God do anything in this mess? We have an impasse again with the people of God in Egypt.

Can God bring anything good out of this? And over and over again, throughout Scripture, and throughout history, God's purposes seem to run into the buffers.

Can God salvage anything? And does this set aside the covenant with David? David was promised back in 2 Samuel 7, that there will never be a time when a son of David will not sit on the throne.

And what these verses are showing us is that judgment does not cancel out previous promises. Judgment is real, and we need to face up to it. There's no such thing as cheap grace in this chapter.

And let's look at two things here as well. First of all, the gracious preaching of judgment. A few weeks ago, Dick Lucas spoke to us from Jonah, and showed us that the preaching of judgment is what he called a mercy ministry.

[22 : 24] And so it is. Because when God preaches judgment, God is calling us to repentance. God is calling us away from the judgment that is threatening us. Verse 11 to 13, Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, Since this has been your praxis, you have not kept my covenant, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant, and that servant, as we learn later, is Jeroboam.

And notice verse 12, For the sake of David your father, I will not do it in your days. Now, when the Lord spoke to Solomon, it may well have been the Lord, sent a prophet to Solomon.

That's probably what happened, because all the way through the books of Kings, we have these prophetic figures, some of them named, some of them unnamed, and some 70 years later, the great prophet Elijah is going to burst on the scene with his powerful ministry.

And here we have one of these figures in verses, in verse 29 and following, At that time, when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, the prophet Ahijah, the Shilohite, found him on the road.

And his words, and his dramatic actions, dramatize the way the kingdom is going to be divided. This phrase, found him, is very interesting.

[23 : 46] That's exactly what, that's exactly what's used about Ahab and Elijah. It doesn't just mean Ahijah happened to be passing, so there's Jeroboam. This suggests that the Lord had sent him onto that road with a specific, specific task to meet Jeroboam.

And, notice what he says. He says that, to Jeroboam, in verse 38, if you will listen to all that I command you, will walk in my ways and do what is right in my eyes, I will be with you.

Now, Jeroboam, as I've said, is the man who caused Israel to sin. That wasn't inevitable. The prophet said to him, if you obey, I will establish your house.

And that's why the preaching of judgment is mercy. because the covenant is given so that people can live. Now, the reason the covenant has curses as well as blessings is because we are fickle and wayward people and take God's grace for granted.

So, that's the first thing then. God, in his grace, sends prophets with a message of judgment. And, notice God's grace is undivided. There's nothing half-hearted or uncertain about this message.

[25 : 07] Well, the second thing is the faithfulness of the Lord to his promises. Surely, notice how often David, my servant, was mentioned. God has chosen a place, David.

He has, sorry, chosen a person, David. He's chosen a place, Jerusalem. And, that means that God has covenanted himself to that person and to that place by promises that he cannot and will not break.

That's what covenant is about. And, that's why judgment is going to be restricted. The son of Solomon, the sons of Solomon are to have one tribe.

Trinkly speaking, there was the tiny tribe of Benjamin as well. But, Judah was the major component. And, in fact, the kingdom of David was reduced to a tiny rump, a small region around Jerusalem.

And, yet, the judgment was to be restricted. Notice verse 39. I will afflict the offspring of David because of this. Judgment is coming, but not forever.

[26 : 14] As Rolf Davis says in his commentary, affliction, but not abandonment. That's very important. Affliction, but not abandonment. And, there's all kinds of hints here of the graciousness and the promise of God.

notice that for the sake of verse 32, he shall have one tribe for the sake of my servant David, for the sake of Jerusalem, the city I have chosen. And, then goes on to enumerate those things that Solomon has done in his idolatry.

But, God has not abandoned his people. God has not abandoned his purpose. And, yet, his people will not enjoy that covenant, will not enjoy blessings, if they disobey.

And, that's so important to realize as we go through the story. The covenant is unilateral. The promises are unconditional. But, they can only be enjoyed through obedience and through faith.

So, where are we then as we leave Solomon at this moment? I think the first thing this chapter is telling us is never become complacent.

[27 : 27] Never rest on your laurels. Never do what Amos criticized when he criticized those who were at ease, those who were complacent in Zion. Youthful enthusiasm can so easily become middle-aged prosperity and old-aged complacency.

I worked long enough with students to see many sad cases of those who were prominent in student work in Christian unions and so on who are nowhere now. Oh, I don't mean they've abandoned the faith, but they are simply living comfortable, complacent lives and the Lord is no longer at the heart of their lives.

This story is telling us to walk humbly and prayerfully to the end of our journey. And secondly, a question that's often asked, what about Solomon?

Did he find grace at the end? Was he restored? My own view, which I can't prove, is that that is probably true because the epitaph of Solomon mentioned here in verse 41 and his wisdom does not mention his apostasy which is done in the case of later kings and the book of Chronicles does not mention these incidents at all.

However, I want to say this, I think that's the wrong question to ask and I think when we ask a question like that, behind it lurks another question.

[29 : 06] How far can I go and get away with it? if Solomon got away with it, if he was accepted at the end, can I be as well? No, surely that is the wrong question because once we ask that question, we're already on the slippery slope.

Surely, what this passage is saying to us is this, recognize our weakness, recognize how frail we are, recognize how likely we are to slip away, recognize that as the days and the months and as the years pass, it's so easy to be seduced from earlier faith and vitality.

And therefore, trust in the covenant making and covenant keeping God, the one who is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before the presence of his glory.

the Bible refuses to answer our question, what happened to Solomon. What the Bible is saying to us, take heed if we stand lest we fall.

May God bless us and have mercy on us all. Let's pray. Our Father, how we'd love to have ended that story with a ringing endorsement of Solomon.

[30 : 34] How much we would have loved the story to give us the answer to that question. And yet we believe this is the wrong question. And we lay our hearts open before you.

We are feeble, we are weak, but you are strong. Our own resolution, our own faith is not a rope strong enough to hang on.

And so we cling to your abounding grace and trust in your unfailing word and pray that through all the days of our lives you will keep us walking with you until the day when we see you face to face.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.