

1. Faithful God, Fickle People - Solomon's Glory and Disgrace: The Disputed Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Faithful God and Fickle People, the Glory and Disgrace of Solomon, that's the title of this short series we're going to be looking at over the next few weeks.

We won't meet Solomon very much today, but this is necessary background. Henry Ford, the car manufacturer, once famously said, history is bunk.

And many people have found that as they've turned to the Old Testament history books, particularly one and two kings. It's easy to get mixed up with your Ahaziah's, particularly when two of them are reigning in the two kingdoms at the same time.

That's even before you get to your Jeroboam's and your Omri's and Zimri's and so on. And many people find the books of one and two kings both tedious and irrelevant.

That, of course, is a great and grievous mistake. These books are full of living truth for us. They are history, of course. They are a record of what happened, of people who actually lived.

[1 : 06] Nevertheless, they are words for us, not just words for them. Now, what are the two about what we're going to try to do over these few Sundays? First of all, we need to see the big picture.

We need to fit Solomon into the place where he belongs in the unfolding story of the Bible. Where does he fit in? Now, over many weeks, Willie has been leading us through the story of Abraham in Genesis.

And you can say, in a sense, the story of Solomon begins in Genesis 17, verse 6. When the promise is made to Abraham, an additional promise, God had promised Abraham descendants and land.

Now he promises something else. I will make you into nations and kings shall come from you. So in a later stage of the journey of faith that we've been exploring over those last months, the story of Abraham now becomes the story of the monarchy, the monarchy in ancient Israel and beyond to the exile and return and to the coming of the kingdom of God itself, of great David's greater son.

And in these chapters, Genesis 1, of course it was Genesis Abraham was in, I've got a pong-chong, some of you will have noticed for getting my words mixed up. And here's another example of it.

[2 : 29] I hope that by tonight I'll have distinguished between Peter and Paul because, unfortunately, they're both mentioned in the same passage, but we'll do our best. Anyway, in 1 Kings 1 to 11, we have the glory of Solomon and we have the disgrace of Solomon.

We've got to fit it into the big picture, otherwise we'll end up with a kind of moralizing preaching. The kind of preaching that goes something like this. David fought giants.

We have giants to fight in our lives as well. That big bully down the road. That nasty boss at work and so on. Now that is clearly not what the story of David and Goliath is about.

It may be a secondary application. Or Solomon was good in this, follow Solomon. Solomon was bad in this, don't follow Solomon. There is some truth in it. But first of all, we have to fit it into the big picture.

This is the story of the people of God as they live in the promised land, as they live under kings. That's the first thing. But secondly, we have got to apply it to our fellowship and to individuals.

[3 : 36] Sometimes people get the big picture right and then they leave it unapplied and everything's up in the air. This is a story of wisdom and folly.

And let me recommend Ralph Davis' excellent commentary. It's out there. Which is called that wisdom and folly. It's a story of wisdom and folly. It's a story of faith and of unbelief.

It's a story of achievement and disaster. And therefore we need to learn lessons about the unchanging God, the faithful God in our changing circumstances.

So we're going to keep an eye on the whole picture of the story of salvation, the people of God. We're also going to be saying, what is this story saying to us? What's it saying to us as a fellowship at this time?

What's it saying to us as individuals? So let's turn then to these verses and to chapters 1 and 2. I've called this overall the disputed kingdom.

[4 : 35] I'm going to divide what I have to say into three parts. First of all, the endangered kingdom in chapter 1. Then the obedient kingdom in chapter 2, verses 1 to 4.

And finally, the established kingdom in the rest of chapter 2. I couldn't think of another E which meant the same as obedient.

If any of you can tell me that, tell me that later. But anyway, we're going to look at the endangered kingdom, the obedient kingdom, and the established kingdom. So first of all, the endangered kingdom.

Because here we have a series of plots and counterplots as David bows out of his great and long reign. And indeed, you could read this chapter and think there's not much spiritual nourishment in this at all.

It sounds simply like a story of power politics. And on one level, that's what it is. It is, first of all, a crisis of leadership. Now, looking at it in the big picture, this has happened more than once.

[5 : 40] Joseph died, soon forgotten, and a period of slavery ensued. Moses died, and then Joshua succeeded.

But after Joshua and the elders who outlived him, things went badly and disastrously wrong. You can read about this in the book of Judges. So the author is telling us this is not just the death of an individual.

It's the passing of an era. David, we are told, in verse 1, was old and advanced in years. Exactly the words used about Moses and Joshua.

In other words, we're at one of these moments when a great leader is about to pass off the stage.

And then in chapter 2, verse 2, David says, I'm about to go the way of all the earth.

And the word once again used of Joshua. So we're at a crisis moment. And at these moments, we need to remember that God is in control.

[6 : 38] Such moments happen to the Christian church, don't they? Perhaps a leader, a much-loved and respected leader who's been influential in many churches, dies and leaves a gap that's difficult to fill.

Perhaps a minister of a church who has served for long and served wisely and well goes. And there's some concern about what will happen after him.

In our individual lives, sometimes a trusted and loved mentor passes from the scene. And then we suddenly feel bereft. We suddenly feel alone.

What are we going to do in these moments? What's going to happen? And we need to remember in these moments that God is with us. We need to remember the words of Jacob to his sons back in Genesis 48.

Jacob says, I'm about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you up again to the land.

Remember that when a leader goes. The leader dies, but God is with us.

[7 : 42] It was Wesley who said, God buries his workmen but carries on with his work. Ultimately, no one is indispensable. But on the other hand, that doesn't mean we sit back and do nothing and then say, oh God, well God will work it out.

Because here we have the activities of Nathan and others ensuring the succession of Solomon. That's the human side, if you like. God's side, God will appoint his true leaders, but humans have responsibilities as well.

And that's why Paul says to Timothy, as Paul's ministry is drawing to a close, teach faithful men who will be able to teach others also. The huge importance of training the next generation.

That's something that many good faithful evangelical churches have failed to do in the past. And the results have been disastrous. We need to train. We need to teach our young people.

And it's so good. There is so much emphasis on the training and the mentoring of youth here. And we need to hold on to that because that's so valuable. So we have a crisis of leadership with God in control, people's necessary response.

[8 : 56] But simultaneously, we have the emergence of bad leadership, which is always a danger at such a time. Chapter 1, verse 4. We are told that Adonijah, the son of Haggith, exalted himself,

saying, I will be king, and he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen and fifty men to run before him.

It's a good idea, by the way, if you're reading biblical narrative, to read big chunks of it. It's a good idea to sit down and begin in 1 Samuel 1 and read to the end of 2 Kings.

Not necessarily in one sitting. Well, if you have the stamina, it wouldn't do you any harm at all.

Because one of the points about narrative is we need to get the flow. And if we've read the story in 1 and 2 Samuel, we'll remember that Adonijah is following a very sinister example.

All that's said about Adonijah here, a handsome man born next after Absalom, recalls the rebellion of Absalom. It also recalls, incidentally, what was said about Saul back in 1 Samuel.

This guy looked good. This guy was impressive. But notice the telltale phrase. He exalted himself.

[10:16] In IV, he put himself forward. In other words, without calling, without approval, he begins to act as king.

He's not just a handsome playboy. He's already made preparations. He's got a bodyguard. And he enlists the support of the wily Joab, David's commander-in-chief.

And Joab and David have always had an uneasy relationship. And Joab's only too happy to join with him. And this is underlined in verse 8, when the true followers of David do not go with Adonijah. David's mighty men were not with Adonijah. That wonderful catalogue of heroes you read about at the end of 2 Samuel. He exalted himself.

And so, he winds and dines away from reality as Solomon is beginning to emerge as the true leader. It's a lesson for us, doesn't it?

[11:16] We read in 3 John, for example, about the sinister figure of Diotrephes, who loves to have preeminence, who loves to put himself forward. Christian fellowships know all about such people, don't they?

The family who wants to dominate the church. The person who is always pushing himself forward. Those who are always feeling they ought to be given a place.

Forgetting that it is God who calls and God who gifts. So often people, and there are seeds of this in all our hearts, aren't there?

We love our own way, don't we? We love to have the preeminence. We are great at putting ourselves forward. Well, those kind of things we want to do anyway. So you see already, this ancient story has powerful lessons.

The importance of leadership. It cannot be exaggerated how important good leadership is and how disastrous bad leadership is. Once again, read through King Samuel.

[12:20] See the disastrous activities of Eli. His total failure to curb his sons. You'll notice, of course, that David is not guiltless here.

Look back at verse 6. His father had never at any time displeased him by asking, Why have you done thus and so? This is a great temptation for us always, isn't it?

We're always... The devil is very clever and very often he tempts us with our families, doesn't he? Tempts us to settle for something less, to be something less, and to do something less.

So the endangered kingdom, endangered by the passing of leadership, and David for all his faults was a true and a great leader, the emergence of bad leadership, but by the providence of God and the activities of David and others, Solomon comes to the throne, and we are told that he is long-lived King Solomon, which is really a sign of loyalty.

Solomon reigns more exactly. It's exactly the phrase you get in some of the so-called kingship sounds, the Lord reigns, the Lord is king. It's not just a statement of fact, but a declaration of loyalty, saying, look, are you on Solomon's side, or are you on Adonijah's side?

[13:46] But secondly, the obedient kingdom, chapter 2, verses 1 to 4. Now, amidst all this, amidst the confusion of everyday life, how are God's people going to be safe, how is true leadership going to be emerged?

I believe these few verses, chapter 2, 1 to 4, are the key to understanding the book of Kings. When you're reading biblical narrative, it's not altogether easy to work out what the right thing is, because very seldom do we get comments.

The author tells the story, allows us to draw our conclusions, but gives us pointers, and here is a major pointer. This is going to be so important.

The book of Kings is going to be dominated by various people, known and unknown, who are called men of God. Now, when you come across the phrase man of God in the Old Testament, you are

talking about somebody who is in the line of Moses, somebody who is calling people back to the Torah, to the law of Moses.

And incidentally, that's what Paul is meaning in Timothy, when he says the man of God. He's saying, Timothy, you've got to be a Moses. You've got to teach people the word of God. And, of course, the most prominent example, the great figures who straddle the middle of kings, Elijah and Elisha, calling the nation back to God.

[15:12] Then, towards the end of the book, you have Josiah's great reformation, which is energized by finding the book of the law. So, you see, in chapter 1, and indeed the rest of the book, it's not all that easy to distinguish right and wrong, but here is the key.

First, how are we going to keep faithful? We're going to be faithful if we, verse 3, walking in his ways, keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules and his testimonies, as is written, in the law of Moses.

In other words, the words of Moses, which are the words of God, will keep the leaders and the people faithful. And if that's the case, the promise to David, which you read about in 2 Samuel 7, the covenant with David, David, you are going to reign, and your sons after you will reign, and this would be fulfilled, but there will be no enjoyment of those blessings unless the king and the people remain faithful.

That's true for us today, isn't it? There are all kinds of recipes given to us by all kinds of people of success in the Christian life, but the key to success is obedience.

The key to walking is walking in the ways of God. First of all, then, obedience is comprehensive. The words use commandments, rules, testimonies, different aspects of the same reality, and also walking in his ways.

[16:49] That's a total lifestyle. What Psalm 24 calls clean hands and a pure heart, outward and inward integrity. These have to be kept.

What do you mean by keeping? Now, keeping doesn't mean putting in a glass case, in a kind of museum exhibit, and come saying, look how faithful we are. We've changed nothing for 60 years. That shows how faithful we are, and how loyal we have been to the word of God. Well, if such were to be the case, that certainly shows how loyal we've been to our traditions, but the point is to be faithful to the word of God is to pass it on.

How do we keep it? We keep it by sharing it with others. We keep it by telling the story, and as others come to the Lord, new people join, and the word is passed on.

Other generations. And once again, 2 Timothy emphasized, this is the way the church will remain faithful. And notice this in verse 4.

[17:52] If your sons play close attention to their way to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and all their soul. Notice that phrase, with all their heart and all their soul.

There is a kind of obedience, which is purely intellectual, which is no use at all. The letter of James tells us that the theology of hell is totally orthodox.

The demons believe and tremble. It's not the kind of belief that leads to any change. This will be central to Solomon's story, heart and soul. One of the things we're going to see about Solomon is that Solomon's heart, while open to God, was fickle.

And that's the problem with Solomon, as we'll see as we go through. So, obedience to the word of God must be comprehensive. But secondly, obedience is practical.

There is nothing more practical than the word of God. Remember a few years ago, doing such series of Bible studies at a minister's retreat.

[18:55] And somebody said at the end, when they were discussing what they'd do next year, they said, well, let's do something practical next year. We've done the Bible this year. So, we'll do something practical next year. Now, that's the attitude of many people to the word of God.

It's a useful resource. It's helpful. It's got insights. Now, when we say that, we're in real danger. We're departing from the truth.

Because the word of God is not a resource. The word of God is the authoritative message to keep us faithful in this world and to lead us to the next.

Whether it's for the ancient kingdom or God's people, if we do that, we will prosper. What does that mean? Prosper does not mean the prosperity gospel with its deceitful promises.

The prosperity gospel is a dreadful thing. Try telling the prosperity gospel to the persecuted Christians in India. Try telling it to somebody who's lost a loved one.

[19 : 56] Try telling it to someone who's lost their job and is struggling. Try telling that. And of course, people do. And they make it even worse. They say, if you'd really been faithful to the Lord, you would have prospered.

Now, that is wicked. It's not just wrong. It is wicked. The prosperity gospel is totally damaging to people's souls. And the prosperity gospel ought to be repudiated by every right-thinking Christian. The prosperity promised here is the goodness of God, the generous abundance of God, and our eternal security, whatever may happen, en route to it.

And when you think of David and Solomon's story, there was a time when the kings were driven out. The last king of Judah, Zedekiah, was taken as a prisoner to Babylon.

Never again, actually, did a Davidic king sit on David's throne in Jerusalem. But we learn, of course, from the Old Testament that that promise was to be fulfilled more gloriously than David could ever have imagined.

[21 : 04] You see, the problem about prosperity gospel thinking is everything has to happen in this world. Everything good has to happen to us here and now. But surely what it does see is that in this life we can build what will last into eternity.

We can build things that will not be burned up on the last day. So the obedient kingdom, obeying the word of God, living by it, believing it, loving it.

And finally, the established kingdom in verses 5 to the rest of the chapter. Verse 12, So Solomon sat on the throne of David, his father, and the kingdom was firmly established.

Solomon begins to emerge. Next week, we'll meet him more fully, of course, in chapter 3. But it's interesting. Read the chapter later. Verses 1 to 4, David gives, what you might say, spiritual advice. Follow the Torah. Then in 5 and following, he gives political advice. Now it's, oh, I ain't wrong with doing both these things, but we've, want to say a word or two about that.

[22 : 16] David speaks here about the defeat and removal of enemies. Now the commentators differ here. Some say that this is perfectly necessary and thus justified.

Some say, on the other hand, that David and Solomon are being vindictive and engaging in sordid power politics. Now, which is true?

I want to suggest that both are to a certain extent. Because, I think our author is showing a deliberate ambiguity here.

Asking us to consider this man Solomon. What kind of a man is he? On the one hand, a good man who loves the Lord. On the other hand, a man who effectively and speedily destroys his political enemies.

The question I think this chapter wants us to ask is this. David gave Solomon political advice and Solomon very swiftly, very effectively followed that.

[23 : 24] One says nothing wrong with that. But the question is, did he follow the spiritual advice so readily and so thoroughly? And surely a lesson for us here, we live in a fallen world.

Think about it this way. Many of us have done and many will do in the future written CVs. When you write a CV, you obviously sell yourself.

If you're sensible, you don't tell lies, but we're all familiar with how we make the most of things. But you know, we could all write another CV for ourselves, couldn't we?

We could all write CVs about our jealousies, our spites, our ungodliness, our deceitfulness, and so on. Which is true? Which is the true us?

And the answer is surely both. Paul says in Romans 7, isn't it? We are two principles that are at war within us.

[24 : 25] One which loves the Lord and one which loves the world. And if we're experienced Christians or even if we're not experienced Christians, we'll know that that battle will remain with us as long as we are in the world.

And that's why we've got to read this story thinking about these things. I think at this stage what I'd want to say there is everything to play for. Things could go well and things could go badly.

Imagine if we didn't know what happened and we stopped reading at the end of chapter 2 and said, I wonder what's going to happen next. I think what we would say is, well, things can go well.

This is promising. Let's see what happens. And the other thing is the emphasis on the line of David in verses 10 to 12. David's city and David's throne.

These are the emphasis in he was buried in the city of David. He reigned over Israel 40 years, a long, long time. At any time, particularly a long time in those days.

[25 : 30] Now, as we take the story forward, we're going to find that that throne is going to look exceedingly shaky. Solomon's scarcely gone when his son, that Ninkamput Rehoboam, succeeds in having the kingdom torn apart.

And from then, from the Ninkamput Rehoboam to the born loser, Zedekiah, there's very, very little to encourage. Oh, we have some bright spots. We have Asa and Jehoshaphat who get two ones, so to speak.

But only Hezekiah and Josiah get firsts. Josiah with the stars first. But even they are failures. And the story ends at the end of Kings with Judah in exile, David's throne gone and the temple destroyed.

But, we've got to flash forward in the story to Acts chapter 2 where Peter in his Pentecost sermon speaks about David's tomb but also shows how David's greater son has broken the power of death and not only opened the kingdom of David but the kingdom of heaven to all who will believe.

The established kingdom. And when we pray, your kingdom come. That's what we are praying for. God bless these words to us.

[26 : 48] May, as we continue as individuals and as a fellowship, may we support and pray for good leadership. May we obey the word of God and look to the coming of the King who is to reign.

Let's pray. God, our Father, as we read these ancient words, we uncannily see our own lives rolling before us. we see the potential and the wasted opportunities.

We see the triumphs and the disasters. So make us faithful, Lord, faithful to your word, loving it with all our heart all the days of our lives. Amen.