

2. Faithful God, Fickle People - Solomon's Glory and Disgrace: Listening to God and ruling wisely

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[0 : 00] And so we come to what I would call Solomon's Springtime, an attractive and sparkling chapter where the atmosphere is, I say, of early spring of great promise.

Some of you may have seen the television program *After They Were Famous*, which takes the careers of people who for a short time came into the public eye and were distinguished for something at some early stage in their lives.

And then later on, they dropped out of public awareness. Sometimes their subsequent lives were quite happy and fulfilled, except they weren't in the public eye. But there are many cases of people who, after initial success and after initial fame, turned to alcoholism, to drugs and so on, and their whole lives went into a downward spiral.

I can never read the story of Solomon in its entirety, from 1 Kings 1 to 1 Kings 11, without feeling a desperate sense of sadness.

This chapter is undoubtedly positive. It's a wonderful chapter, an amazingly beautiful chapter, and a wonderful story.

[1 : 18] That this should all disappear. That Solomon should end the way he did. I want us to keep that in mind, because we have to look, as I said last week, at the big picture.

We are not Solomon. It's not a case of saying Solomon was good, do this, Solomon was bad, don't do that. There are lessons to learn, but only once we've fitted this into the big picture of the kingdom of Israel, and then, of course, to the coming kingdom of God, which Psalm 72 is about.

And this chapter undoubtedly anticipates some of the glories of that kingdom, just as chapters 4 and 5 do, where incidentally you have a partial fulfillment of some of the promises to Abraham.

We saw last week how this story naturally follows on from the story of Abraham, whom Willie's been leading us through over these last months. This is a later stage in the story, and it's a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in Genesis 17.

Not only descendants and lands, but kings shall come from you who will reign. So this is a warm and positive picture of the young Solomon as he begins his reign.

[2 : 32] And yet, in the first three verses, there is a certain ambiguity. Two question marks, two shadows fall across the story. Solomon, we are told, made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

He took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David. Remember Egypt and its significance in the big story. Remember Abraham's story again, how Egypt proved a great seduction for him.

Abraham, we are told, went down to Egypt. And in the book of Numbers, the desire of the people to return to Egypt. Let's go back to Egypt. There's actually much better there. And the letter to the Hebrews sees this as a warning, not to go back, but to press on.

It's only a question mark at this point. Although later on in chapter 11, as we'll see, the only difference between the daughter of Pharaoh and all those other daughters that Solomon married was the eminence of her dad.

And you can see how politically this was a good thing, an alliance with the Pharaoh and the marriage to his daughter. The other slightly alarming phrase is verse 2.

[3 : 43] The people were sacrificing at the high places. Now, throughout the books of kings, kings are commended or condemned for not removing the high places.

Now, these high places were sometimes simply hills, sometimes artificial platforms, sometimes both. What was wrong with them? What was wrong with high places?

I want to suggest once again, when you fit that into the big picture, this is the old error of Babel. Let us build a tower whose top will reach to heaven. The idea if you climb stairs, you are nearer God. The idea, you know we talk about this phrase, up among the gods. The idea that God is closer to us if we climb mountains or climb stairs. Now, I don't want to overdo this at the moment because this is a positive chapter.

I just want to mention it because it makes sense of the rest of the story. Many of the commentators talk as if up to chapter, about chapter 10, Solomon was wonderful and then suddenly he simply reversed everything.

[4 : 50] But that's not realistic, is it? No one goes to bed one night walking with God and then gets up the next morning an idolater. There is always a process, sometimes a very gradual process.

It's so gradual, you hardly notice it. I want to suggest that right from the beginning there is an ambiguity about Solomon. Look at verse 3, Solomon loved the Lord.

Now that's absolutely true. I'm not suggesting for a moment that Solomon's love was not genuine.

I'm sure it was. The trouble was that Solomon's love was fickle.

Solomon had divided loyalties. Contrast that with the young Daniel. Read Daniel chapter 1, verse 8. Daniel resolved.

Daniel purposed in his heart. And all through Daniel's life there was this steady resolve to love the Lord. After all, loving the Lord is like loving your partner.

[5 : 49] It's not just the initial falling in love. It is the remaining loving, the remaining faithful. And that was where Solomon fell down.

His love was genuine. I mention that not because I want to go to the opposite extreme. And some more recent commentators have done that. Gone to the opposite extreme and say he was damaged goods right from the beginning.

What I am suggesting is, and what we can learn from him, is the danger of fickleness. The danger of what the New Testament calls loving the world.

Because these two things, love of Egypt and love of the high places. After all, the temptation of prominence in the establishment. And the temptations of religion rather than faith.

But let's look now at the rest of this chapter. Verses 3 to 28. And we're going to look at it in two parts. Verses 4 to 28.

[6 : 49] Verse 4 to 15. I'm going to call praying faithfully. Praying faithfully, verses 4 to 15. And acting wisely, verses 16 to 28.

Now these are not so much two subsequent things, although they are. But they are two parallel things. The acting wisely is the result, a consequence of praying faithfully.

So let's look at this then. Solomon goes to Gibeon where the tabernacle was. And he went to sacrifice. The Chronicles, who also describes this incident, say that many others went with him. But the author of Kings wants us to focus on Solomon. And there God appeared to him in a dream. Verse 5. Now we know in scripture dreams can be a way of revelation.

God appears to people. God appeared to Joseph. God appeared to Daniel, whom I've already mentioned. And still in the New Testament, God appeared to the wise men, to Joseph and to Paul.

[7 : 52] There's no sharp distinction between dream and vision. Now notice what I'm not saying. I'm not saying, therefore, that we try to remember our dreams and ask what God is saying to us through them.

If you remember your dreams, and I often remember mine, they're a total farrago of nonsense. But the point is, this is not, I'm not suggesting you go to Borders and buy one of those books, How to Interpret Your Dreams.

This is God in his sovereignty using a dream to speak to Solomon. But notice that's balanced by walking in the statutes of David, your father, and so on.

In other words, all revelation has to be governed, has to be judged by the word of God. And that's a very important principle. And we have echoes to here of the call of young Samuel in 1 Samuel chapter 3.

If you read that passage and compare it to this, you'll find parallels. God appearing, God speaking. And so what can we learn about this prayer? And the first thing we learn is that this prayer is about God rather than about Solomon.

[8 : 59] What do we learn about God? And the first thing we learn about God is that he is amazingly generous. This open-ended offer, verse 5, At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a

dream by night, and God said, Ask what I shall give you.

There is nothing niggardly about God. God is amazingly generous. Sometimes we forget this in our prayers, don't we? We tentatively ask if God can give us something which is very modest, and then if he doesn't give it, then we can say, Oh, well, never really expected it anyway.

Nor is this saying that everything we ask of God, we will automatically be given. We will not get everything we want. What we will get is everything that God wants us to have.

And God is amazingly generous. Now, we are not Solomon. But the letter of James says, James chapter 1, verse 8, If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives generously.

There it is. Now, notice, he doesn't say if anyone lacks something else. If anyone lacks wisdom. In other words, if anyone is not sure how to walk with God, if anyone doesn't know God's will, let them ask God and he gives generously.

[10:22] God is not niggardly. As the hymn writer William Cooper said, You are coming to a king. Large petitions with you bring. Since his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much.

Be bold in our prayers, because God is generous in his giving. God is amazingly generous. But secondly, God is consistently faithful.

Verse 6, Solomon said, You have shown great and steadfast love to David, to your servant, David, my father. Notice, Solomon's prayer focuses not on the request, but on who God is and what he has done.

And there's great words, which is very difficult to translate. The Hebrew word, eseth, steadfast love. The love of the God of the covenant. And here again, David links with the big story.

First of all, with the story of David. Love to your servant, David, my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness and righteousness and in uprightness of heart towards you.

[11:28] Back in 2 Samuel 7, God made a covenant with David. And that covenant said, Never will there come a time when your sons will not reign on the throne.

And, of course, that seemed to be challenged when the exile came. But in Christ we know that that was fulfilled more wonderfully and will be fulfilled more amazingly than David could ever have imagined.

He goes back beyond that. Verse 8, Your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen. A great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude.

That clearly is an echo of the promise to Abraham. Remember, Abraham was told, Your descendants will be too numerous to count. You can count the sand on the seashore. You can count the stars of heaven.

Then you'll be able to count your descendants. You see, Solomon is linking himself with that great story. God, this is the kind of God you are. You're amazingly generous. You're consistently faithful.

[12:32] And that is the foundation of praying. Praise him for all that is past. And trust him for all that's to come. That is the covenant God. But you'll notice the, you'll notice the verse 7, verse 6 once again.

He walked in faithfulness, in righteousness, in uprightness of heart. God's love is unconditional. But in order for that love to be enjoyed, there needs to be faithfulness.

There needs to be, there needs to be response. There needs to be, there needs to be faith. So God is amazingly generous. God is consistently faithful. And thirdly, God cares for his people.

And this is the point, it seems to me, of verse 9. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this great people?

The welfare of God's people is at the heart of Solomon's request. Notice he asks for an understanding mind, to govern your people. This is a very important verse for any leader to ponder.

[13:44] First of all, it reminds the leader that all authority is delegated. It is given. Under shepherds need to remember that that authority comes from the chief shepherd.

And Peter says that if under shepherds are faithful, when the chief shepherd appears, they will be given the crown of glory. That does not fade away. It's a very important verse. But it's also a very important verse for everyone.

Give your servant an understanding mind, that I may discern between good and evil. Not an understanding mind, that I may give people what they want, and pander to their desires.

But that I may lead people in godly ways, that I may discern between good and evil. That I may not, that I may not repeat the sin of the Garden of Eden.

I mean, once again, as I say, the whole of the story flows through Solomon here. This big story of the God who cares for his people. Who is able, Solomon says?

[14:44] And the answer is no one. No one at all, apart from the grace of God. Leadership needs to be drenched in grace. And of course, obeying godly leaders needs to be drenched in grace as well.

This is not, this is not about good works. This is about grace. Who is able, who is sufficient for these things, as Paul says? The answer is no one, apart from the grace of God. And the other thing that this prayer tells us about God, is that God's pleasure, is the true aim of prayer.

verse 10 to 14, it pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. Why do we pray? We pray primarily because it pleases God.

As John Piper says so regularly, God is most glorified, whom we most enjoy him. And this is, and this certainly is in keeping with what's said here, it pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. Because prayer is much more about relationship than about request. There is, of course, request in it, obviously. But prayer is, first and foremost, about relationship.

[15:54] Praying to God is not going online and ordering things. Prayer to God is the outcome of a relationship with God. A relationship between one who has everything, with those of us who have nothing.

A relationship between the one who is amazingly generous, who is consistently faithful, who cares for his people. And notice how, and notice how God says, because you have asked this, behold, I now do according to your word, but I'll give you what you have not asked for.

Now, once again, we've got to remember, this is using human language. It doesn't mean that, it doesn't mean that God didn't know what Solomon was going to ask.

It doesn't mean that God didn't know what was in Solomon's heart. It means that God is saying to Solomon, all your reign, if it's going to be an effective reign, must be lived in relationship with me. I'll give you a wise and discerning mind. I will also give you both riches and honor, so that no king will compare with you all your days. Now, if it finished there, that would be the prosperity gospel, wouldn't it?

[17:06] It would be, you know, pray to God, and everything will go well. Your bank balance will look favorable. You'll have several cars, and the drive. Everything you want will be gratified.

But it doesn't end there, does it? Verse 14, And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days.

And that, of course, echoes the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. You may live long in the land, which the Lord your God has given you. And notice both words, walking and keeping.

Walking is the whole way of life. Keeping is the detailed obedience, as I mentioned last week, to the law of God. Solomon needs to respond. That's the first thing then.

Praying faithfully, and praying faithfully, is ultimately about God. The generous God, the consistently faithful God, the caring God, and the God who has greatest pleasure when his children have a relationship with him.

[18:05] And now we come on to acting wisely. Indeed, to a certain extent, all the next few chapters, up to about chapter 9, are special examples. But this is one of the most striking examples of all, of Solomon acting wisely.

An instant example of the prayer being answered. This story is a classic example of biblical narrative. The brilliant use of suspense.

The characterization. And look at verses 18 and 19. The effective use of circumstantial detail. This woman remembers every detail. Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth, and we were alone.

There was no one else with us in the house. Only we were in the house. This is the kind of story that has an eyewitness feel about it. A sense of truth.

And it establishes already the just and wise kingdom. Now what is this telling us? First of all, it's telling us that when the king rules wisely, everyone receives justice.

[19:15] And this echoes the words of David in 2 Samuel 23. Whoever rules over people must be just. And when that happens, then it is like a spring morning.

That's one of the reasons I call this a springtime chapter. Because it's the freshness of a spring morning, the rain falling on a parched landscape, the sun rising after darkness.

Even prostitutes will receive justice. Now that's not what happens in the fallen world, is it? Remember these horrible series of killings. I think it was in Ipswich. Street girls, many of whom driven there because of desperation, were murdered and butchered. This is what happens when a society forgets God and becomes obsessed with its own pleasure. But in the Solomonic reign, and in the reign of the king who is to come, everyone will receive justice. And read once again, read later on Psalm 72. Psalm we've already sung a version of, which I've already referred to, where we get glimpses in the reign of Solomon only fully when the king returns, when justice will flourish, when righteousness will flourish.

[20 : 22] So that's the first thing. In this kind of kingdom, everyone receives justice. The second thing is that people have genuine choices. This is not, it's not a case of these women were caught up in a juggernaut of fate.

Both these women were at the bottom of the heap. Both of them were prostitutes. And yet one chose the path of self-interest, which is the essence of sin. And the other one showed the capacity for unselfish love, which is the response to the grace of God. See how this story is so powerful. Most of these women had exactly the same chance, or, what if it were exactly, exactly the same lack of chance. There was nothing in their background that would have predisposed one rather than the other. And yet one chooses the path of self-interest in order to, in order to get her own desires. Never mind about the child, kill him, cut him in two. Whereas the other one, capacity for unselfish love. And it's not surprising, verse 28, all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered.

[21 : 31] And they stood in awe of the king because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice. And that's the final point, that Solomon points beyond himself.

I mean this in two ways. First of all, I mean that this is a clear example of God's justice working in society, which happens even before the kingdom comes.

When the gospel really touches hearts and lives, the kingdom is anticipated. And sometimes, in times of revival, in times of unusual blessing, whole communities are affected.

I read of an 18th century community in Cornwall, which was notorious for its violence, for its drunkenness, for its sinfulness, this kind of place that no one went out of doors after dark and people were afraid to visit.

But this, a traveling merchant visited the place and left as soon as he possibly could because of these things. He was absolutely terrified. Twenty years later, he returned to that community.

[22 : 41] Well, there was still sinfulness. Human nature, human nature is human nature. There was still unpleasantness, but there was a radical change in the whole community.

And the merchant spoke to an old man and said, what happened? Twenty years ago, this place was so utterly different. This man said, there came a man among us called John Wesley.

He preached the gospel to us. That gospel not only changed individual hearts, it changed the whole nature of that community. Now, that's only a glimpse of the kingdom that's to come.

But even today, the relevance of the gospel to everyday living, this is not just, this is not something remote. This is what happens when people's lives are changed.

The kingdom is anticipated. When we pray, your kingdom come, we're not simply praying for the day ahead. We are praying for it to happen in our lives.

[23 : 40] That's the first way in which Solomon points beyond himself. But secondly, he of course points to the coming king. King of whom Isaiah 11 speaks.

That's Isaiah 11, 2 and following. The spirit of the Lord will rest upon him. The spirit of wisdom and discernment. He shall judge the weak in righteousness.

So this wonderful little chapter, this springtime story, points to, not points beyond itself, not just the spring, but to full summer when the king returns to set up his kingdom.

As we pause in Solomon's story at this point, I think we would have to say so far, so good. He's made a wonderful start. But also, he's made it absolutely clear to us in his prayer and in his action that this kingdom will come only through the providence and the mercy of God.

So as we pray for the kingdom to come, let's remember that and let's rejoice in those signs of the kingdom we see around us even now. Lord, he's done so much and let's listen to those signs and to think of the kingdom with behel of the kingdom and the kingdom and the kingdom of the kingdom and the kingdom of the kingdom God came to me and thank you for guys and thank you for all the glory of the kingdom and be accomplished