

3. Faithful God, Fickle People - Solomon's Glory and Disgrace: Wisdom reigns and all is well

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[0 : 00] And now today we're coming to the third of our series in Solomon's life. I've called this series Faithful God, Fickle People, and we're looking at the life of this king and seeing what it has to say to us. And today we've reached one king's four, which I'm calling Wisdom Reigns and All is Well.

Well, if you don't particularly like the Old Testament, if you're not instantly attracted to it, probably this chapter has done nothing to dispel your fears. Is anyone here really interested that Zabud, son of Nathan, was the priest and king's friend, or who Ahimaaz married?

Right. Probably none of you have really thought about these guys this week at all. It doesn't really sound instantly edifying. And when you read the commentators, it gets worse. Some of the commentators say this list is clearly a late and inferior edition. Doesn't that kind of comment really thrill your heart and warm your soul? But this is God's word for today.

This is not simply an ancient book. This is not just simply a list of names and a list of Solomon's rather extravagant cuisine and his great wisdom. This is God speaking to us today. This is God telling us that when wisdom reigns, all is well. When a king reigns in righteousness, as David had said back in 2 Samuel 23, then the people prosper, then the land is at peace.

And first of all, in the big picture of the Bible, Solomon anticipates the king who is to come. In a sense, the verse 20 is the key to the chapter. Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy. Now that looks in two directions.

[2 : 10] It looks back to the very early stages of the story because what was Abraham promised? Your descendants will be like the sand on the sea. If you can count the grains of sand, if you can count the stars in the heavens, then you can count your descendants. But he looks forward to the new creation when true joy and happiness will be established because the true king will reign. And the other thing, just to mention this in passing, this picture is a historically accurate one. We are round about the years 1000 BC to 900 BC.

Israel then as now, fairly small core country between the great empires in the north and in the south. But we know from historical evidence that these empires were more abundant. Egypt involved in internal struggles, Assyria and Babylonia in the north fighting each other. The Hittite empire in Turkey had collapsed. So we have a situation where David and Solomon are able to control that entire area.

But more important than that, that's not just a historical detail. If it were, it would only be of interest to historians. This is a fulfillment, a partial one certainly, of that promise to Abraham in Genesis 15. To your offspring, I give this land. From the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates. So for a brief moment, we have a snapshot of what happens when God's king reigns and when the promises are fulfilled.

The land between the Nile and the Euphrates, the country from where they had been enslaved, and the other country where they were to be enslaved, we have a glimpse of God's promises, which do not fail and which are never broken. So what happens then when wisdom reigns?

[4 : 05] I want to look at the chapter as it develops in three parts. First of all, when wisdom reigns, ordinary life flourishes. That's really verses 1 to 19. Ordinary life flourishes.

Secondly, verses 20 to 25, when wisdom reigns, joy and peace are experienced. And thirdly, when wisdom reigns, verses 29 to 34, minds and hearts are satisfied.

That's what happens when wisdom reigns. So first of all, ordinary life in verses 1 to 19. It's easy to be super spiritual and to forget how important it is not to live in a chaotic state.

Anyone who's worked in a chaotic job or lived in a chaotic home knows very well how everything, all the ordinary business of living, becomes so complicated and so difficult.

Now all this may seem very dull and very trite. But as I say, this is part of the rule of God in ordinary lives. These guys whose names are here, they were real people.

[5 : 21] They lived and breathed like us. They had joys and sorrows like us. They had to live their ordinary lives as we do. And we need to learn from them. You see, another thing, this chapter is not moralising.

It's not saying, be like Solomon and organise your life like this and then everything will go well. This is not good advice on how to win friends and influence people.

This is not like one of those self-help books which are so common in the bookshops and indeed in the Christian bookshops, those books that begin how to, as if there were a simple recipe.

No, this is a gift of God. Solomon in chapter 3 had asked for wisdom. He had been given wisdom and this is the result at a much later stage in his life.

Many years have passed between chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3 he is a young man setting out on his reign. By this chapter, verses 11 and 15 mention two of his daughters who are married to these people who are mentioned here.

[6 : 31] So clearly we are in the middle stages of Solomon's reign. But what is happening here? And I think what is happening here is Solomon uses the gift of wisdom.

This shows itself in a wise choice of people to rule. For example, in verses 4 and 5 and so on, he relies heavily on those who had proved their worth during his father's reign.

Unlike his son, that nincompoop Rehoboam, who at the very beginning of his reign refused to listen to anyone and the country was torn apart. Solomon realizes that if his kingdom is going to be well organized, if he is going to rule well, then he has got to be sensible.

And the other thing is he gives a strong lead himself. Verse 1, he was king over all Israel. Now this isn't just a fact. This is a key to everything that comes next.

One of the problems in ancient Israel, it has often been identified in our own land, is the north-south divide. And that of course is what happened once Solomon's wise hand is off the tiller.

[7 : 40] The country is divided into two parts, the south around Jerusalem and the north later around Samaria. But Solomon's appointments, if you read them, we're not going to go into this, but you can find details of this in the commentaries.

And by the way, let me, I was critical about some of the commentaries, but let me mention the wonderful commentary by Ralph Davis on these chapters, on 1 Kings, which is certainly worth reading.

And you'll see that Solomon made wise appointments, drawing from different parts of the kingdom. So what's all this got to say to us?

Well, first of all, it's saying to us that wisdom is not just for the church. I read these verses from Solomon's own proverbs at the beginning of the prayer a few moments ago.

Wisdom cries aloud in the streets and utters his voice in the marketplace. Not wisdom cries aloud from the pulpit and utter his voice in the church, but wisdom cries out in the streets.

[8 : 42] In other words, we need to hear the voice of wisdom everywhere. We need to hear the voice of wisdom when we go to work. We need to hear it in our homes. We need to hear it in classrooms and lecture rooms and laboratories and businesses everywhere where people meet and where people work.

Read the book of Proverbs. There are always two voices calling. Chapter 9 of that book, both wisdom and folly invite us, and they invite us to a party, and very often they speak with what sounds like the same voice.

Folly is very, very plausible. And that's why, in our ordinary lives, we must never make a distinction between what we do here and what we do 24 hours from now on Monday morning.

The reason why church, the reason why the gospel is so boring to many people is because they divorce it from their ordinary lives. What they do here and what they do outside bears no relationship to each other.

Now, when that happens, of course, we're not listening to the voice of wisdom. The prophet Amos speaks about those who wish the new moon, the Sabbath, the various festivals are over so they can get back to their business.

[10:02] Now, that is listening to the voice of folly. Everything that is done is to be done for the Lord. We are doing the Lord's work in our daily business when we do it in his name and for his name.

And that seems to me the point about all these lists of names and about the administrative districts and the 12 officers provided food and to make provision and all the rest of it.

These men are carrying out wisdom in the ordinary business of life. And if wisdom doesn't apply to the ordinary business of life, then it will seem very irrelevant and very dull.

All that is of God will last into eternity. And surely that's a foreshadowing of the day to come. Read Revelation 21 and 22 and find how the whole of God's new creation is a unity.

The kings of the earth, we are told, will bring their treasures into the heavenly city. And I take that to mean that all that has been good and worthwhile in this creation will be carried over into the next.

[11:12] That all of life is under God's control. So that's the first thing that happens when wisdom reigns. Life and worship belong together.

And people don't simply listen to the voice of wisdom as something, some churchy thing we do on Sundays, but as something that governs the whole of our lives. It is possible to do everything to the glory of God.

However dull, however boring, however trite, it can be done for him. That's the thing to remember in difficult workplaces with truculent colleagues and difficult bosses.

We're doing it for him. We're not doing it for them. It's being done for him. And Paul tells us in Colossians, whatever we do, let's do it with all our hearts as to the Lord.

And that's in the middle of a passage that talks about just these very things, daily life, daily relationships, daily work, and so on. So Solomon, the author of Kings, tells us that when Solomon reigned in wisdom, when he listened to the voice of wisdom, when he used the gift of wisdom that God had given him, ordinary life flourished.

[12:28] But secondly, verses 20 to 28, joy and peace are experienced. Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy.

Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms, from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.

Now this is not just reporting. There's many, many references to earlier scriptures, to the big picture. There's a sense of real excitement. I suggested a week or two ago that chapter 3 had a springtime atmosphere.

I think this chapter has a summer atmosphere. Does anyone read Matthew Arnold nowadays? What Matthew Arnold calls the high midsummer pumps. Wonderful.

You should read them if you haven't read them. But anyway, there's a sense of joy, a sense of wonder, a sense of fulfillment here. And first of all, there is the fulfillment of the promise of Deuteronomy chapter 8, verse 8.

[13:31] Moses says, you will come to a land with streams, with vines, and with fig trees. And this is being experienced. And you only need to read the book of Judges and the grotesque chaos there to see how important it was that this was happening now.

The book of Judges ends with the words four times. It's repeated in the last chapters. There was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

But now we have a king reigning in wisdom. The whole land from Dan to Beersheba, verse 25, the limits of the country, you would say, from Land's End to John of Groats or something like that.

Every man under his vine and under his fig tree. And under the vine and under the fig tree are often used in the Old Testament to mean peaceful living, to mean happy and fulfilled living.

And the abundance of Solomon's provision, the ten fat oxen, the twenty pasture-fed cattle, hundred sheep, deers, gazelles, roebucks, and fat and fowl. That really recalls the generosity of the creation story in Genesis 1.

[14:43] God floods the world with generosity, with teeming life. And this is shown here in the kingdom when the wise king is reigning. But just at this point there is a warning note.

Now I said this already in the first two, in the first two of the series on Solomon, that we're going to find in a few weeks' time that Solomon comes to a catastrophic, disastrous end.

And why is that? He didn't just, he didn't just turn overnight. I think all through Solomon's story, amid the positive nature, amid the sunshine, amid the rejoicing, there are warning notes.

Look at verse 26. Solomon also had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots and 12,000 horsemen. And these little verses that talk about the horses and their provision.

Now what's wrong with that, you may say? What's wrong with having horses? The point is not that it's wrong to have horses. It's the sheer number of horses that are mentioned here.

[15:51] And once again, back in Deuteronomy, we find the answer. Moses says in Deuteronomy chapter 17, verse 26, the king must not multiply horses.

He mustn't have great numbers of horses and chariots. And why is that? It's because horses and chariots stand for military strength. They stand for dependence on the arm of flesh.

They stand for dependence on human effort. As I say, it's just a little note and you could easily miss it because it could simply be seen as part of the general generosity and warmth of the chapter.

But it is a sign that Solomon may be moving away from the open-hearted dependence on the Lord that marked his early days. And later on in chapter 10, he's not only going to have horses, he's going to send to Egypt for them, which is another warning bell.

So what are the implications of all this for us, the experience of joy and peace? I think one is this, that even in this world, God sometimes gives us times of great joy and blessing because of his generosity.

[17:05] There are times, there are seasons, when, if you like, the pressure is off and God, in his abundant generosity, allows us to anticipate the world to come.

And we need to accept these gratefully. We need to thank God for them and not spoil them by the typically Scottish, oh, we'll pay for this. You know, there's kind of, this kind of unwillingness to accept anything.

We apply it to the weather and we so often apply it to good things that happen. But we must remember that they are not a substitute for the new creation.

They are anticipations of it. In the Screwtape letter, Screwtape says this, the wormwood, he, then he, of course, is God. He's a hedonist at heart.

All these crosses and deaths are foam on the surface of the ocean. He really wants these wretched humans to enjoy themselves. And that's an important point.

[18:07] We must remember that God is generous and when he gives good gifts, we accept them with thanksgiving. Think of the, think of the psalm that we sang at the beginning, Psalm 98, one of those great psalms that rejoices in the creation to come, but in doing so, rejoices in the anticipations in this creation.

Beautiful autumnal morning today, the trees turning brown and the landscape showing the, showing the, the ancient promise fulfilled as long as the earth remains.

Seed time and harvest, summer and winter, day and night will never cease. So that's the first implication. Thank God for these good times but remember they anticipate even better times.

But secondly, we must be careful not to rely on these times. And that seems to me once again the point about the horses and chariots. Almost as if Solomon is relying on this, almost as if he's trusting in them.

And surely the book of Ecclesiastes warns us against that. The book of Ecclesiastes talks about all these good things. It talks about wealth, it talks about sex, it talks about learning, it talks about all the good gifts of creation and says that if we rely on them they become futile, they become empty.

[19:29] The Hebrew word hevel, which means a puff of wind, they disappear. But when they're received as gifts then they are blessings, then they anticipate the world to come.

The point is that pain and grief and tragedy affect our lives. Of course they do. but they are never ends in themselves.

We mustn't get into thinking about the gospel as if these things were ends in themselves. They are there to lead us to greater things and to greater blessing.

And that's why our life is so much composed of weeping and laughter. These things are part and parcel of our lives. but God gives us many blessings and quote C.S. Lewis again.

He says, Our Father scatters many fine resting places on our journey. Many pleasant holidays but he never encourages us to mistake them for the homeland.

[20:31] I think that's the important thing. He never encourages us to mistake them for the homeland but we rejoice and thank him because he gives these things to us as anticipations of it.

So, ordinary life flourishes. Joy and peace are experienced. And finally, in the last verses, 29 to 34, minds and hearts are satisfied.

The important verse 29, God gave Solomon wisdom. That's once again a reminder of chapter 3. Not Solomon was intelligent intelligent and brilliant which he was but that God gave him wisdom and many words are used, wisdom and understanding, breadth of mind like sand on the seashore. And what's this saying to us? First of all, it's telling us that the wisdom that comes from God is greater than the wisdom of the world. Now, these guys in verse 31, are not household names to us. You don't go down Buchanan Street and find people talking about Ethan the Ezraite and Heman, Calcol and Darda. They don't. But this is saying that Solomon's wisdom is greater than that of the great civilizations.

[21 : 53] Egypt, with its splendor, its magnificence, after all the wisdom of Egypt in which Moses was brought up. And then the other great empires, the Tigris, Euphrates Valley, and all their wisdom.

Solomon was wiser than the doctors in Oxbridge, wiser than those in Yale and Harvard. Solomon's wisdom is a gift of God.

And God-given wisdom always is. There's nothing anti-intellectual about God. Remember Daniel as well. Daniel was learned in all the wisdom of the Babylonians. And as Christian people, as gospel people, we must never be browbeaten into believing that we're naive and foolish.

We must never let the Richard Dawkins and others tell us that we're ignorant fundamentalists because God has given to us the wisdom that is greater than the wisdom of the world.

And if you're students, for example, God's given you brains and God's given you opportunities to use them. And they must be used for his glory. And they must be used for the blessing of others.

[23 : 04] So first of all, it's greater than the wisdom of the world. Secondly, it ranges over all of God's creation. Verse 32, he also spoke 3,000 proverbs.

The songs are 1,005. He spoke of trees from the sea that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts and birds, of reptiles and of fish.

He was a man who was interested in God's creation. Once again, surely recalling Genesis 1. Because Genesis 1 is not simply an account of creation.

It's a great hymn of praise to God. To God the generous, to God the magnificent. So it looks back once again. You see how so often Solomon's story looks back to the creation, to the promises, to Abraham and so on.

But it also looks forward to the prophets are going to speak of this as well. Those wonderful passages in Isaiah and elsewhere where the wolf lies down with the lamb and so on.

[24 : 07] Where Isaiah sees a renewed and restored creation where animal life, plant life, everything is fulfilling the purpose of which it's made. I've often said before, that's why creation is called good.

Good means fulfilling the purpose of which God made it. So in the words of Solomon, as he spoke his Proverbs, as he sang his songs, as he wrote his words, many of which are recorded in Scripture, we have a picture of creation and we have the warning against the folly that also is in the early chapters of Genesis.

And if you look at books like Proverbs, you can see how wisdom and folly are, to use the terms of Genesis, the way of God and the way of the serpent. And James, in his letter, tells us there is a wisdom which is devilish and comes from below.

But finally, Solomon's wisdom is for sharing with others. Verse 34, people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

Later on, in chapter 9, the Queen of Sheba is going to come and be astonished and indeed speechless at the wisdom of Solomon. Nothing that she had met before had ever prepared her for this.

[25 : 26] You see, ultimately, no wisdom and no knowledge is for our own benefit. Wisdom cries out in the streets. She invites us. And if we are going to follow the voice of wisdom, which is ultimately the voice of Christ, then we must pass on that wisdom to others.

We need to show that this wisdom is not a private benefit. It's not like shutting yourself away in a library or in a study and enjoying the wisdom, the learning for your own sake.

God's given this to us and God wants us to share it. Now, we are not Solomon. That's the point I've made over and over again. It doesn't mean that this is, let's say, be like Solomon.

What the chapter is saying is ask for wisdom. And the letter of James says, if anyone lacks wisdom, the whole wisdom is something to be received, but if anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God.

And what does James go on to say? Who gives generously? That's the point about God. God is a generous giver. There's nothing niggardly. Don't ask God just for a few things.

[26 : 39] Come to God with big petitions because he is a big God and he will give wisdom generously. And all that wisdom brings us to Christ himself in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

This chapter, although it may appear to be remote from us, is a gospel chapter. This is what happens when wisdom reigned in Solomon's kingdom. What happens when wisdom reigns in our hearts and lives and in our communities.

what happens, this chapter says, is that they ate and drank and were happy and they were as many as the sand of the sea.

In other words, that kind of wisdom as it's shared with others is going to bring others to join the benefits and to receive the gifts and to receive the blessings. And that is all to be found in him who is the wisdom of God.

Let's pray. that our Father, we are not Solomon. We live in very different days and yet the voice, the voice of wisdom that calls us, the voice that speaks in the marketplaces and in the busy streets, that is the same voice, the voice of the gospel, the voice of the Lord, the voice of invitation and the voice of warning.

[28 : 01] May we hear that voice today and not only hear it but share the benefits of it with others so that others may come to know and others may come to gather with your people.

We ask this in his name. Amen.