

Women's Bible Study Spring 2012

Kings and Kingdoms: God's Sovereign Hand in Israel's History

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The Unwise King Solomon 1 Kings 5:1 – 11:13

Gretchen Steer



Last Sunday during communion John relayed a story about my uncle Lowell which involved me having to call 911 and making the paramedics break down the door of his farmhouse in order to reach my uncle, who was lying on the floor.

By the time we got in, there were 2 paramedics, a sheriff and a couple of first responders...I guess it was a slow day in Waseca, so everyone came. We all stormed into the living room where Lowell was lying on the floor, thankfully conscious. One of the paramedics said, "Lowell, what are you doing there on the floor?" to which he responded, "I'm taking a nap – can't you tell?" The only problem was that he'd been "taking a nap" for about 12 hours and had some serious physical problems. He's still recovering in the hospital but thankfully hasn't lost his sense of humor.

My Norwegian bachelor uncle has been fiercely independent his whole life. But one of his most endearing qualities is that he never changes. He is the same sweet but tart tongued person he always was. When I see Lowell I am reminded of finishing well.

King Solomon, whom we're studying today, did not finish well. Although his forty years of monarchy saw Israel at its most powerful and influential, Solomon himself did not follow God and his spiritual decline led the nation downhill as well.

So we're calling this passage today "The Unwise King Solomon". Two weeks ago Jann Wright outlined how Solomon, as a young and inexperienced king, asked God for wisdom to govern his people, and explained how God delighted to answer that prayer. When we last saw Solomon everything was going great. The kingdom was at peace, Solomon was growing in wealth and influence, and was living up to his name: wise king Solomon.

We'll pick up his story today in chapter 5 of 1 Kings. But because we are covering almost 6 chapters today, we'll be skipping around quite a bit. You might also wonder why the Bible contains two sets of books telling essentially the same stories – 1st/2nd Kings, and 1st/2nd Chronicles. Well, it's no different than having 3 synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) telling virtually the same events from the different point of view. But because one writer sometimes includes a detail lacking in the other, I've drawn in some of the Chronicles passages as well. We'll look at five aspects of Solomon's reign, beginning with:

I. Solomon's Building Projects – Two Palaces and a Temple (1 Kings 5:1-9:9)

Solomon took the throne from his father David when he was somewhere between 15 and 20 years of age. Imagine governing at such a young age! He was the tenth of David's sons. David was described as "ruddy and beautiful." Absalom was charming. Even Adonijah was described as "very handsome" (1 Kings 1:6). But Solomon was just a nondescript teenager thrust on the throne as David was dying.

Solomon took his father's advice quite seriously, and aggressively eliminated his enemies in the first few years. He may not have been handsome or charming, but what Solomon had was astounding wisdom from God and the ability to govern strategically. He had great intellect and pursued study of many branches of science and history. And because God had given Solomon a peaceful, united kingdom, thanks primarily to David's many battles, the time came that Solomon could build.

Four years into his reign he began building **the Temple**.

It was completed in the 11th year, when Solomon was somewhere between 26 and 30 years old.

We need to think about the temple for a few minutes, because so much ink is devoted to it in the Bible.

First, the site chosen for it was called Mount Moriah, which was the very place that Abraham had offered his son Isaac before God intervened. Later on David saw the angel of the Lord in that place, which by then was being used as a threshing floor. David built an altar there to atone for his sin. So the temple was located where God had met with man in the past.

The temple was superficially similar to the desert tabernacle, but much more elaborate and permanent. Like the tabernacle it contained an inner room, the Holy of Holies, into which only the high priest could go once a year to provide atonement for the people. Other sacrifices were offered on its altars and in Solomon's day the scale was enormous. Literal rivers of blood from sacrificed lambs, goats and bulls would have run through the drainage ditches outside the city. While the tabernacle was as beautiful as a nomadic people could make it, with woven fabrics and tanned leathers, it was a movable tent. And the temple was a building. Look at 1 Kings 6:19:

"The inner sanctuary was 20 cubits long, twenty wide and twenty high. He overlaid the inside with pure gold and he also overlaid the altar of cedar. Solomon covered the inside of the temple with pure gold, and he extended gold chains across the front of the inner sanctuary, which was overlaid with gold." (1 Kings 6:19-21)

There were carvings of cherubim, palm trees and flowers, reminding the worshipers of the Garden of Eden, the place where God and man had dwelt together, and which now was only accessible through the sacrifice of worship at the temple.

The Temple was meant to be a place where the Lord God Almighty would dwell. God promised his presence there when worship was conducted in sincerity and truth, in a way that recognized holy things as sacred. And God showed his approval of the completed temple when it was dedicated. Look at 1 Kings 8:10:

"When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple." (1 Kings 8:10-11).

God was pleased to dwell in the temple. It was the place where he could have relationship with his people, who had separated themselves by their sins. Yet when the priest made atonement for sin through the animal sacrifices, God accepted those hearts that longed to worship him. But the temple was just a short term solution. Solomon's temple stood for awhile, was torn down, rebuilt by Zerubbabel, torn down, and rebuilt by Herod only to be flattened for good in 70 AD. By then it didn't matter. God no longer dwelt in a place that failed to recognize his holiness.

Only one wall of Solomon's temple is still standing, and here is a picture of it. It's known as the Wailing Wall. Even though it's huge today, the actual wall in Solomon's time was about 80 feet higher than what we can see – we're just seeing the upper part of the original wall. I've stood in that courtyard, or at least as close as a Gentile is allowed to come, and watched the orthodox Jews praying frantically before the wall, sticking their prayers into the cracks between the stones, bewailing the fact that the temple is gone and that it now serves as the foundation for a mosque.

The temple foreshadowed the time when the Lord God Almighty would become incarnate in Jesus Christ and be permanently present with his people. That's why the Temple was pulled down for good. It was no longer needed, because Jesus in a sense became the temple, the place where God and man met freely once again. Although Jews thought of the temple as the greatest possible thing on earth, Jesus explained to them that the temple was only great, because of the One who made it holy. The temple itself was just a structure, and Jesus explained about himself,

“I tell you that One greater than the temple is here.” (Matthew 12:6)

But why was the temple so great? It wasn't as big or grand as some of the ancient world's structures. The Parthenon...the temple of Diana...these were all much larger and grander. But for that time and that place, the temple was extraordinary. It was built of dressed stone and cedar logs, which were floated from 125 miles away and then dragged about 30 miles across country and uphill to Jerusalem. It was built in silence – no tools were used to chisel or hammer or cut the materials onsite, but instead, each stone was prepared offsite to fit next to the one beside it like a jigsaw puzzle.

In building the Temple Solomon honored David's wishes, utilized David's political connections, and used David's materials. It wasn't until I read through these accounts several times that I realized Solomon was really carrying out his father David's vision rather than his own desires. Listen to what the Chronicler had to say:

“David said, ‘My son Solomon is young and inexperienced, and the house to be built for the LORD should be of great magnificence and fame and splendor in the sight of all nations. Therefore I will make preparations for it. So David made extensive preparations before his death.’ 1 Chronicles 22:5)

“I have taken great pains to provide for the temple of the LORD a hundred thousand talents of gold, a million talents of silver, quantities of bronze and iron too great to be weighed, and wood and stone. And you may add to them...Now begin the work, and may the LORD be with you.” (1 Chronicles 22:14; 16) These materials equal 150 years' worth of Solomon's annual revenues of gold. No wonder Solomon was able to plaster gold all over everything in the temple.

“Then David gave his son Solomon the plans for the portico of the temple...he gave him the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the Lord.” (1 Chronicles 28:11-12)

“All this,” David said, “I have in writing from the hand of the LORD upon me, and he gave me understanding in all the details of the plan.” (1 Chronicles 28:19)

These are some pretty extraordinary claims on David's part – first, that the Holy Spirit gave him the plans, and that God wrote them down for David. But all that background meant that Solomon took the building of the temple very seriously.

I deliberately haven't talked much about Solomon's prayer of dedication and blessing in 1st Kings chapter 8. But I would encourage you to read through it on your own, because it is a truly beautiful prayer where Solomon acknowledges that God's blessing is dependent on God's people seeking him. Because of Solomon's wisdom he truly did understand a great deal about God. Just listen to this statement from 1 Kings 8:27:

“But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27) Even though the average Israelite might have concluded that a captive God would now live in this beautiful house, Solomon understood that God was beyond containing in any structure, and that his presence there was only because God willed it, not because of anything Solomon had built. But notice that God is pleased by its beauty, and more importantly, by the heart attitude of worshiping him with our best. God doesn't need our “stuff” – our material things. He already owns the cattle on a thousand hills. But what he desires is our willingness to offer to him that which is most important to us. And often material things are precisely what we're unwilling to give God. So God showed his blessing on the completed temple:

“When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.” (2 Chronicles 7:1)

God did actually have the last word in this section. He warns Solomon of the consequences of disobedience and false worship, but promises that he will always hear the prayer of true repentance. The dedication of the temple is the setting for that famous verse in 2nd Chronicles 7:14:

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.” (2 Chronicles 7:14-16)

But I called this section Solomon’s building projects. What else did he build?
The royal palace.

The Palace of the Forest of Lebanon (1 Kings 7:2) took 13 years to build, was much larger than the temple, and included the Throne Hall and the peacock throne. Look at 1 Kings 10:18: **“Then the king made a great throne inlaid with ivory and overlaid with fine gold. The throne had six steps, and its back had a rounded top. On both sides of the seat were armrests, with a lion standing beside each of them. Nothing like it had ever been made for any other kingdom.” (1 Kings 10:18-20)** Can you just imagine what it would be like for an archaeologist to discover some of the artifacts from Solomon’s kingdom? But because they were so glorious they were carted off by various conquerors, never to be seen again.

In addition to the royal palace, Solomon built a **palace for his Egyptian wife**

This was as large as his own palace but was located some distance away, as Solomon explains:

“My wife must not live in the palace of David King of Israel, because the places the ark of the LORD has entered are holy.” (2 Chronicles 8:11)

His pagan wife did not belong in his spiritual life.

We’ll come back to this Egyptian wife in a few minutes, but she was one of the first political alliances Solomon made in his early kingship. Marriage with Pharaoh’s daughter opened up some mutually beneficial trade routes between Israel and Egypt. So it was a savvy political move but a fatal spiritual one.

Now, let’s look next at:

II. Solomon’s Influence (1 Kings 9:10-10:13)

You might remember in the very first lecture about Saul, how the high priest Samuel predicted in 1 Samuel 8:10-18 that if Israel wanted a king, they would get a despot. That a king would take their sons and daughters to be his soldiers and hairdressers and slaves – that they would give up their freedom because of the king they were crying for:

“He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day.” (1 Samuel 8:18)

This did not happen in Saul’s nor David’s day. Israelites served as soldiers, true, but the king was still one of the people. That all changed when Solomon took the throne in peacetime. Yes, it was a wonderful undertaking to build the temple, but how do you think it got built? Solomon took all the alien, non-Israelites living in the land and enslaved them:

“He assigned 70,000 of them to be carriers and 80,000 to be stonecutters in the hills, with 3,600 foremen over them to keep the people working.” (2 Chronicles 2:18)

This was a business model that Solomon might have learned from his Egyptian Pharaoh father-in-law. That's how the pyramids got built, after all, by slave labor. Israel had left slavery in Egypt, but the whole nation lost freedom under Solomon.

Because of Solomon's increasing wealth and influence, Israel became famous in the rest of the known world. Israel had always been a small country, somewhat isolated, not conquerors like the Babylonians, the Egyptians and the Hittites. But under Solomon, with his ships trading all over the Mediterranean, it became an international economic powerhouse. We get one little story about the Queen of Sheba which illustrates this. She was Queen from Sabea, an area which is located in modern day Yemen – so quite a ways from Israel. She traveled to Jerusalem to meet with Solomon and to test his famous wisdom, and here's what she concluded in 1 Kings 10:6:

"The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me..." (1 Kings 10:6-7)

"Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel." (1 Kings 10:9)

In a sense we can see that Solomon is sort of buying the hype – he's getting used to the idea that he is the head of a world power, and now he has to live like the monarchs of the major countries around him. So next we see:

III. Solomon's Splendor (1 Kings 10:14-29)

We all know that gold is a precious commodity to this day. There was a limited amount of it and gold items were forever being taken as tribute or in war from one country to another. But don't forget, a lot of Solomon's gold supplies had come from the obedient action of his father David, who took the gold he received in his successful wars and socked it away for the day that the temple would be built:

"King David dedicated these articles to the LORD, as he had done with the silver and gold he had taken from all these nations: Edom and Moab, the Ammonites and the Philistines and Amalek." (1 Chron. 18:11)

Because of Solomon's trading network he had an astounding income:

"The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents, not including the revenues from merchants and traders and from all the Arabian kings and governors of the land." (1 Kings 10:14)

"Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift – articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules." (1 Kings 10:25).

I visited Queen Victoria's palace, Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, full of the wealth of the nations for whom she was the monarch. This was back in the day when Britannia ruled the waves, and she had tribute and gifts from all the colonies streaming into her kingdom. I saw remarkable objects made of gold, and ivory, and jewels given to her by Indian monarchs. Solomon's kingdom was like that. Gifts flowed to him from all over the known world – exotic things like baboons and peacocks and ivory.

But the really big deal for Solomon was horses. I know that we can hardly imagine an ancient king who didn't have horses, but they were actually forbidden to the Israelites.

"Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem." (1 Kings 10:26)

Why was this a problem? Because God knew it was a form of mimicking the culture around them. Israel was a hilly nation, not suited for fast horses, yet horses and chariots were the war-making atomic weapons of their time. The danger was they would allow Israel to rely on weapons, not on God. The splendor of horses and chariots was making Solomon just like every other king. Worse, it meant that they had to trade with Egypt, who was the great breeder of horses. God had warned in Deuteronomy 17 about this:

“The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, ‘You are not to go back that way again.’ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.” (Deut. 17:16- 17)

The use of horses for warfare mostly died out in Israel after Solomon. By Hezekiah’s time,(2 Kings 18:23) the Israelites had no horses. Their attackers offered 2,000 horses to the besieged Israelites if they could only put riders on them.

So we’ve seen Solomon’s buildings, Solomon’s influence, Solomon’s splendor and now we see:

IV. Solomon’s Wives (1 Kings 11:1-8)

Who were they?

“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter – Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, ‘You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.’ Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love.” (1 Kings 11:1-2)

It wasn’t just that he was marrying them for political reasons. He really loved women! But why did he need so many?

“He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray...He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites...On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifice to their gods.” (1 Kings 11:3; 5; 7-8)

The problem with the Moabites and the Ammonites is that they were the tribes who sprang from Lot and his incestuous relationship with his two daughters. These folk became bitter enemies of Israel and they were also pagans. Molech, whose name meant “father”, was a bloodthirsty god who demanded human sacrifice – specifically of children. Some accounts describe Molech as a god made of brass with his hands outstretched. The god was heated from the inside with a fire, and a child was placed in Molech’s hands and burned to death. One writer said “the priests beat a drum so that the father might not hear the cries of the child.” Chemosh, whose name meant “destroyer or subduer”, was the national deity of the Moabites. Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians, also went by other names such as Astarte or Ishtar. She was a fertility goddess who was worshiped with obscene sexual rites and ritual prostitution. It was these people, and these religions, that God specifically instructed the Israelites to exterminate in Canaan when they first entered the promised land.

And Solomon was the king who brought the worship of these foreign gods right into the heart of Jerusalem, the center of worship of Yahweh. Like anyone who says today, “But aren’t there many ways to God?” Solomon was an equal opportunity worshiper, practicing whatever felt good rather than what was holy.

So what was

V. Solomon’s Legacy (1 Kings 11:9-13)

It’s perhaps best described in God’s words:

“The Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow

other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. So the LORD said to Solomon, 'Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.'" (1 Kings 11:9-13)

Let's go back briefly to Solomon's greatest moment – the dedication and blessing of the temple. Solomon blessed the people. (1 Kings 8:14; 1 Kings 8:55). Solomon stood before the altar and offered the prayer. (1 Kings 8:22) Solomon offered sacrifices (1 Ki 8:63; 1 Kings 9:25). Solomon consecrated the courtyard (1 Kings 8:64). Where were the priests? From the very beginning Solomon disobeyed the God-given pattern for worship and did what he pleased.

And this is where I see two huge warnings for us. First, it is always dangerous to be so wealthy that we have the ability to satisfy our every whim. And it's even more dangerous to be so powerful that no one can tell us what to do, even God. It is not immoral to be rich. All of us are rich by the standards of the rest of the world. But it is immoral to use our wealth only to satisfy our own desires. Money is meant to be held lightly and used generously for God's work. Only then can we enjoy it in its proper place. To give into materialism is to sign up for a life of chronic dissatisfaction.

Secondly, it's also dangerous to let our feelings dictate how we worship. We worship a God of order, beauty and dignity. Not every whim is suitably reverent. That's why we draw on 2,000 years of Christian tradition. That's why we seek to worship in a way that honors the holy character of God. Solomon did what felt right to him, because he wanted to be in charge. Who knows what might have happened if he'd given priests the role they should have had? Notice also that there were no prophets during Solomon's time – almost as if he wouldn't have listened to them anyway. So when we worship, we need to worship in spirit and truth, in a way that helps us be holy, as God is holy.

What was Solomon's legacy? Sadly, it was to be the king who reintroduced pagan worship to Israel. Beyond that, though, we don't really get a good grip on the man himself. The story of almost every other character in the O.T. contains human details. It's almost as if Solomon is surrounded by an impenetrable wall of his possession so we don't see the man himself. Perhaps the most telling statement attributed to him are the words of Ecclesiastes 12: 1 **"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them.'"** Those are jaded words – words of ennui and disillusionment. They display a man who found out too late what's really important.

So what will we be saying at the end of our lives? Let's ask ourselves

VI. Two Questions

First,

1) Am I drifting?

I once got into a canoe when I was fairly pregnant and rowed myself across most of a lake. I was feeling great – the canoe was just shooting along and I was paddling effortlessly on a beautiful sunny day. But the time came to turn the boat around and head back for the cabin. And suddenly I realized that, in my ignorance, I'd been caught in the current of water created when a lake is connected to another lake by a flowage. Even though the surface of the lake appears completely still, there is a significant current drawing the water towards one end of the lake. I'd been going with the current. But when I turned around and began to paddle against it, life was very different. I fought my way about halfway back, exhausted and beginning to worry if it was wise to exert myself this much when I was pregnant, when John and a friend rescued me.

We don't usually notice when we're flowing with the current. In fact it seems really pleasant because it's effortless. The slight pull in one direction means that we don't have to exert ourselves at all to drift along in the direction of the current. But drifting means that we aren't setting our own direction.

Solomon started to drift when the current of his life became directed by his foreign wives. In an effort to humor them, to please them and maybe to simply keep the peace, he added pagan worship to the worship of Yahweh. This process is called syncretism, and by it, orthodoxy gradually changes to where it's unrecognizable, and therefore no longer pleasing to God.

So am I drifting? Ask ourselves these questions:

1. Do I think things are ok that I used to think were sinful?
 2. Do my convictions govern my choices, or do I usually fit in with the people around me?
 3. Do I really believe that God cares what I do, so long as it's not outright immoral?
- Only you and I can answer those questions truthfully. Drifting is the first stage to rejection.

A second question:

2) What is my legacy?

Solomon's reign was the last time that there was a united kingdom of all 12 tribes. God says that because of Solomon's actions, he tore the kingdom apart. And it never regained its former power. By Jesus' time the Jews could no longer possess their ancestral inheritance. They were subjects of Rome. Solomon's legacy could have been incredible, had he built the temple and then modeled submission to God.

So what's our legacy? Will our children see in us something to be emulated, or something to be rejected? Will our friends think of us as someone untrustworthy, or someone who can always be counted upon? And will our God view us as one who, like Solomon, is not finishing well?

There is an extraordinary power to simply keeping on faithfully, whether that's in relationships like marriage, or in service, or in your love for God. For you women who have been faithful, I want to say Thank you for setting an example of perseverance and faithfulness.

But for all of us who feel as though our legacy is mixed, there's still time to change. We're not dead yet. We can still go on in the strength of Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit and make sure that the last half of our life is something for others to remember with joy and thanks.

Let's finish well.

*WBS is a ministry of Autumn Ridge Church – Rochester, MN 55902
Questions: email wbs@autumnridgechurch.org
www.autumnridgechurch.org*