

King Solomon's Ring

1 Kings 3

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In our current studies we will pass over the final years of King David and move onto King Solomon and learn from him. Already in print is a message on David and Bathsheba (Catalog No.464) which includes some of the material of the latter period of David's life, if you would care to pursue it on your own. There are a number of very interesting legends about Solomon. One is that he was able to communicate with the animals. Rudyard Kipling wrote,

There was never a king like Solomon,
Not since the world began,
Yet Solomon would talk to a butterfly,
As a man would talk to a man.

Solomon seems to be portrayed like an ancient Dr. Doolittle, with an ability to carry on conversations with the animals. This idea is based on a mistranslation of a statement in 1 Kings 4:33:

"...he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish."

This is really a reference to his lectures on biology, rather than any suggestion that he could converse with animals. However, there are some legends to this effect, and also some tales about a magic ring that Solomon possessed, an enchanted ring which gave him his power and ability to communicate with the animals. I doubt that Solomon could talk to the animals, and although Solomon possessed many rings, I am quite sure that he did not possess an enchanted ring. It was not his ring which gave him the power he had. It came from another source, and we will see what that is.

It is very curious that Solomon is perhaps mentioned more in ancient folk literature than any other person of his time, with the possible exception of Alexander the Great. He turns up in many folk tales of this period. Yet when you turn to the Scriptures you find that he is passed over with very little comment. There are eleven chapters in 1 Kings given to a description of his reign, and there is a parallel account in the first nine chapters of 2 Chronicles. Beyond this very little is said about him almost nothing in the Old Testament, and only a half-dozen comments in the New Testament. His name appears in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, and in Acts 7 Stephen refers to him as the individual who built the temple. Jesus referred to him twice - once when he said that the lilies in the field have greater glory than Solomon, and again when he said that one greater than Solomon is here, referring to himself. In both cases Solomon comes out looking rather bad by comparison.

Solomon actually was a very tragic figure. He was a man who had great potential. But he never realized his potential; he squandered it. He was David's favorite son, and David loved him. In fact, the name that David gave him, Jedidiah, is a combination of David's name and the Lord's name, and means "Beloved of the Lord." Bathsheba called him Solomon, which means "peaceful," but David referred to him as one who was beloved of the Lord.

David was largely responsible for his ascension to the throne. During the last years of David's reign, Adonijah, the legal heir, tried to capture the throne and to take the right of succession away from Solomon, even gaining the support of David's army. But David threw the weight of his authority behind Solomon, along with that of David's body guard (his "mighty men of valor"), and the priests, and Solomon were able to put down Adonijah's rebellion and gain the throne, largely through David's intervention.

Solomon was also the recipient of a great heritage from David. David secured a peaceful situation for Solomon. He defeated all of Israel's enemies so that when Solomon came to the throne there was no one left to fight. Solomon was able to extend his boundaries peacefully. He also inherited a great deal of wealth. David spent the forty years of his reign amassing an enormous fortune which was to be invested in the temple and in other ways. Solomon used some of this resource to develop widespread trade interests for Israel. He also received a very rich spiritual heritage from David. David knew and loved the Lord, and had deep insight into the nature of God, and all of this was passed on to Solomon.

In addition, Solomon had great personal gifts. He was what today we would call a charismatic person, extremely wise - even before the prayer we will read about this morning. David referred to him as a wise man who would know what to do when he came to the throne. And yet he squandered all of his heritage. He lost it. So with this background, let's turn to chapter 3 of 1 Kings:

Then Solomon formed a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her to the city of David, until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were still sacrificing on

the high places, because there was no house built for the name of the Lord until those days. Now Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places. And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there [used to sacrifice at Gibeon] for that was the great high place; Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

There are three things I want you to note about this introductory statement. The first is that Solomon loved the Lord and he truly did! From some of the Proverbs he authored, we can be certain that he received a great deal of instruction from David about the nature and character of God, and he truly loved the Lord as David did. But he had a divided heart. He had other loves.

The second thing said of Solomon here is that he formed an alliance with the Pharaoh of Egypt by marrying his daughter, a practice forbidden to Israelite kings. They were not to form alliances with the nations around them because the Lord of hosts would be adequate. He would meet their needs. He would fight their battles. They were not to depend upon any other nation. But Solomon here established a precedent of looking to Egypt for help, and this proved very destructive to the nation. The prophets refer to Egypt as a broken reed, on which if a man leaned, it would pierce his hand. If you want to see what this practice did to the nation of Israel, turn to chapter 11:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, "You shall not associate with them, neither shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods." Solomon held fast to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. [Can you imagine what it must have been like to walk into Solomon's bathroom and see a thousand pairs of hose hanging there?] For it came about when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. And Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon. Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods.

These temples to foreign gods endured in Israel for three hundred years. They were not destroyed until the reign of Josiah. Solomon sowed in his nation the seeds of its eventual destruction. The nation was divided, ultimately, because Solomon's heart was divided. Initially in his reign Solomon's kingdom looked good. In fact, right to the end of his rule the kingdom looked stable. But internally the seeds of destruction had already been sown, although they did not appear until later on when the kingdom was divided.

Solomon is so much like us when we love the Lord, but yet our hearts are divided. We cling to something else. We are like the young Christian who loves the Lord - but he reads Playboy Magazine. Or like the businessman who loves the Lord - yet he tolerates unethical practices in his business. Or like any one of us, when we say we love the Lord, but we cling desperately to something in our life which we know God does not want us to have.

I came around the corner of our house the other day and found Joshua, our three-year-old, wrestling with our Labrador retriever. He had a bear hug on her mid-section, his face pressed right into her side. The dog puts up with this for a while, but when she finally gets enough, she will turn around and nip him. He had learned that, but he is persistent. So he was squeezing her and he had his eyes shut, and as I came by I heard him say, "Dear God, please don't let Kelly bite me!"

I said, "Hey, Josh, I think God is more likely to answer that prayer if you let go of the dog." I went into the house, and Carolyn and I just laughed, because that is so much the way we are. We cling to something we know is going to bite us, and we say, "Lord, don't let it bite us!" "Lord, I love you, but I love something else, too. It is very important to me and I have to cling to it."

Maybe it is some relationship we know is wrong. Perhaps it is some practice we know is wrong. We are not talking here about sins which we all may occasionally fall into. We are talking about patterns of life, sins which we desperately cling to and will not let go of. That was Solomon's problem. He had a divided heart. He loved the Lord, but he loved his foreign wives. And he loved his own wisdom. He felt that he had more insight into the political process than God did. His heart was not loyal like his father David's. So although the kingdom looked secure, internally it began to erode away.

The third thing said about Solomon is that he sacrificed in the high places. These were sites associated with Canaanite worship. The Israelites learned this from the Canaanites. They worshiped on hills. The Scriptures seem to take the point of view that the nation was excused because the people did not know any better, and they did not have any place else to worship.

But Solomon knew better. The language in verse 4 of chapter 3 indicates that it was the pattern of Solomon to worship at

Gibeon. Gibeon was the great high place where the tabernacle had been located, and Solomon worshiped there instead of at the ark of God which was located in Jerusalem. From our last study you remember that David brought the ark to Jerusalem. David moved the ark right into his house. And until Solomon completed the temple, the ark remained in David's house. Solomon could and should have worshiped there.

But Solomon loved display. He was an ostentatious person. He wanted to live his life out before people so they could see how great he was, and so he would go to Gibeon and offer a thousand sacrifices at the tabernacle. But that was not where God wanted him to worship. This is another indication of the divided heart of the man. He was not willing to do what God told him to do.

But the Lord is always gracious. He always meets us where we are. Whether we are ignorant or indifferent or frozen in our sin, he goes where we are and touches us there. And that is what the Lord did for Solomon. He met him at Gibeon, verse 5:

In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream at night; and God said, "Ask what you wish me to give you."

Literally, "Solomon, what can I give you? What do you want?" These questions in Scripture are very important. The Lord asks penetrating questions in order that we may discover what our deepest desires are. When God called Isaiah to be his spokesman to the nation he said, "Whom shall we send, and who will go for us?" That evoked a response in Isaiah: "Here am I, Lord; send me." The Lord said to his disciples, "What do men say about me?" They said, "That you're one of the prophets; you're Elijah." Jesus said, "Whom do you say that I am?" Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." When Jesus encountered the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda he said, "Do you want to be made whole?" The man had lain in that state for so long he had given up hope. But Jesus' question aroused in him again the desire to be healed. So when the Lord said to Solomon, "What do you want me to do for you?" he was probing Solomon's heart. "Solomon, what is it that's important to you? What is your goal in life? What are you aiming at?"

Have you ever asked yourself that question? What is important to you? What do you want out of life? Most of us think in terms of power or wealth or long life, or some variation of those themes. I used to go over to the Student Union at Stanford when I worked there, and I'd sit down and start a conversation with a student by asking him what his philosophy of life was. "What are you living for? What are your goals?" I found this was a great way to share the gospel with people. Most people have never taken the time to think out loud about their goals. It is a question which many people struggle with. And when they answer it, their answer often comes out in such a materialistic way that it frightens even them. So, what are you living for? If you were to take a piece of paper and write down what your goal in life is, what would it be?

Do you know what the Scriptures define as our goal? To be righteous. To be Christlike. Mr. Stedman mentioned once that someone walked up to a small group in which he was conversing with Major Ian Thomas and asked Major Thomas what he was living for. His immediate response was, "To make visible the invisible Christ." Is that your goal? Is it mine - to make manifest in the world the character of God, to let the glory and the manliness and the strength, all the attributes of Jesus Christ, be seen in our lives? That is what Scripture says we ought to be aiming at. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God [i.e., the Lordship of God in our life], and his righteousness, and all these other things shall be added unto you." That ought to be the goal of our life. And do you know that at this point in Solomon's life that was precisely his goal? Notice verse 6:

Then Solomon said, "Thou hast shown great loving-kindness to Thy servant David my father, according as he walked before Thee in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward Thee; and Thou hast reserved for him this great loving-kindness that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day."

As Solomon reflects back upon the man his own father was, it occurs to him that David was a man of truth and righteousness. He sought after these things in his heart. And we say, "David, a righteous man? A man who was a murderer and an adulterer? A man who was possessed at times with massive pride? A righteous man?" Yes, he was, because it was his heart which God looked at. And that is exactly what Solomon puts his finger on. "He walked before Thee in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward Thee." He failed many times, as we fail. He was weak, and at times he failed miserably. But in his heart he wanted to be true and righteous and upright. He had the right goal for his life. And, Solomon said, that is my goal as well, verses 7 through 10:

"And now, O Lord my God, Thou hast made Thy servant king in place of my father David; yet I am but a little child: I do not know how to go out or come in. And Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people which Thou hast chosen, a great people who cannot be numbered or counted for multitude. So give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Thine?"

And it was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing.

Solomon asked for wisdom, one manifestation of the righteousness of God. He realized how inept he was, how inadequate he was

to try to deal with this people in a righteous way, and so he asked for wisdom. Now, in Scripture, wisdom is not merely an understanding of truth. It is not merely knowledge. It is truth applied to life. It is the capacity to relate truth to practical experience, to discern what is right and what is wrong in the everyday situations of life.

James says, "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. [Let him show forth his wisdom in his actions.] Because the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruit, unwavering, without hypocrisy." That is wisdom, the practical outworking of truth in our lives. Solomon said, "That's what I want. I want to be able to discern the difference between right and wrong, and to act on that basis in the midst of these people." What a noble ambition! And it was right that he should ask for this.

Where does that wisdom come from? The Scriptures tell us. Verse 9 could be translated, "So give Thy servant a hearing heart - that translation is given in the footnote in the New American Standard Version - a hearing heart, a heart that listens to the Word. In response, in verses 11 and 12, God says, "Because you . . . have asked for yourself discernment [literally, "hearing," again] to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart . . ."

You see, what makes us wise is listening to the Lord and to his Word. Solomon had a great deal of natural wisdom, but that was not the wisdom by which God intended him to operate. He was to operate on the basis of the word of God. That is where true wisdom comes from. That is how we can learn to discern the difference between good and evil.

In the garden of Eden there was a tree called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." It stands for revelation. God did not want his people to learn evil through practice; he wanted to reveal the truth about it to them so they could avoid it. This tree symbolizes the word of God in our life, which tells us what is right and what is wrong, what is wise and what is unwise. If we want to be wise, we need to hear the Word, read it, listen to it, and obey it.

Isaiah said, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learned, that I might know how to speak a word to him who is in need. The Lord God has given me the ear of the hearer, and I was not rebellious and I did not turn back." Do you want to have the tongue of the learned? Do you want to be able to say the right things to people in need? Then you need a hearing ear. You must not rebel against what God says. You must listen to the Word and let it instruct you. That was to be the basis of Solomon's wisdom. He was to be a hearer of the Word.

And to the extent that Solomon heard the word and obeyed it, he was a wise king. In the paragraphs which begin with verse 16 and continue on to the end of chapter 3, there is an account of a decision which Solomon handed down. It is included as evidence of how wise Solomon was when he listened to the Lord. It is an amazing story, evidently selected from among all the judicial decisions Solomon made because it is outstanding in its display of wisdom.

There were two women, both of them harlots (which in itself is interesting - that Solomon the king would have an open ear to these women, but he did; he listened to their plea). They lived in the same room, and they both had infant sons. One night one of the women awakened to discover that her son was dead. So she took the little dead body and put it in bed with the other mother, and she took the live child in bed with her.

When the other woman awakened in the morning to discover that the child was dead, her first reaction was that it was her infant. But then, because mothers know their children, she realized it was not hers, and this must have been a great relief to her. So she went to the other woman to claim her child, who said no, the child was hers. There was no way to render a decision in this regard. There was no objective evidence. There were no witnesses, and no medical tests available in that day. This case evidently had gone through a number of lower courts until it reached Solomon.

Think this through. If you were the judge, what decision would you render? I tried to work this through in my own mind and finally came to the conclusion that the best decision I could make would be that the baby would spend six months with one mother and six months with the other - which is really no decision at all. Ultimately such an arrangement would be very harmful to the child as well as to the mothers.

Do you know what Solomon did? He asked for a sword, laid the baby at his feet, and said, "I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to divide the baby in half, so that each of you can take one half." The harlot whose son had died said, "That's just." You can see what must have gone through her mind. "If I can't have my baby, then neither can she." But the other harlot, whose maternal instincts cried out on behalf of the baby, said, "No, no, don't kill him. Give the baby to her, only let him live." And Solomon said, "That is the mother."

The most profound wisdom is that which understands human nature, which can see into the heart of man and understand man. Can you understand man? Can you understand yourself? No, you cannot, and neither can I. But God understands you. He understands human nature. The wisdom he imparts enables us to make decisions on that basis. When Solomon acted according to the Word, he was a wise man. When he acted according to his own wisdom, he was a foolish man.

There are only two classes of people in the world, as far as God is concerned: there are wise men, and there are foolish men. Wise men listen to the Word and respond in obedience. Fools reject the truth of God. And when Solomon stopped listening to God, he became a fool.

If you want to read an account of the waning years of his life, read the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon tried everything, and nothing worked. In fact, he came to the only logical conclusion possible without revelation. That is, "Just love the girl who loves you." Be an existentialist. That is the only reasonable conclusion we can come to if there is no word from God. Just live for the moment, do whatever seems to meet your needs at the moment. That is what happens when we depart from the word of God. We are led to that conclusion.

But, if we listen to the Word, then we are wise. We are able to discern between right and wrong, to make fair and just judgements, able to live according to the truth. In our last study we talked about the power which is available to us in a resurrected Lord, who enables us to obey the Word. But when we do not obey the Word, we are like Solomon. Outwardly, we may look good, but inwardly we begin to crumble. The seeds of destruction are sown, our lives begin to fall apart, and we become fools. Jesus said, "If the eye is single, then the whole body will be full of light. But if the eye is evil [the word means 'dual' - with one eye on the Lord, and the other on something else], how great is that darkness." If we have a single-minded loyalty toward Jesus Christ, and a willingness to listen to him, the result is light in our life. But if we reject that, and we grasp at anything else and refuse to listen to God's Word, how great is that darkness!

Father, we thank you for these words from Solomon's life. We all stand condemned as we think through the areas in our own life which we are grasping onto. But yet your word is one of comfort and encouragement. You promise that there is a power which will enable us to let go of the things in our life which are destructive, and to look to you as the only One who is the source of life. Lord, make us men and women who have a single eye. We thank you for the light which transforms our life when we do that, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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