

The Man Who Would Be King

by Stephen Zeisler

Over the years, I have been interested in talking to people who became Christians after they were in their teens. I like to hear about how God carried out the process that Jesus described when he said, "No man comes to the Father unless my Father draw him." How did God draw us to him? For those of us who met the Lord when we were young and who, it seems, always knew him, that process is probably hard to discover. I didn't come to Christ until I was a sophomore in high school. But I can look back and realize that God was doing things in my life prior to that.

I remember starting to read the New Testament after I became a Christian and being surprised to discover how much of it was familiar. The people in the Bible, in particular, were familiar. I remember discovering people I already knew something about. This was because when I was little I had gone to Sunday School. This was not at particularly Christ-- centered churches-- I don't ever remember hearing the gospel in church-- but I remember hearing stories about people, and many of them came back to me. I remember flannel board stories about Zacchaeus and his tree, and the fishermen, and some of the women who followed Jesus. As a result, I've always been kind of interested in the people in the Bible.

There are concepts in scripture that are overwhelming in their depth and their impact, and those concepts are exciting and enjoyable to understand and believe. Yet many of them are difficult. But we may be able to find an individual or a group of people in the Bible who exemplify these concepts and show us these concepts in action so that we might understand them.

God knows the importance of an incarnation. He wants to tell the truth to people, so he puts the truth in a person. So this morning we will study the lives of two men who are prominent in the Old Testament, David and Solomon.

These two men stand together on a plateau that is far above every other individual in the Old Testament in one respect-- they both provided leadership for the nation Israel when it was at its zenith of power, import, and impact. Never before and never after the lives of these two men has Israel wielded such influence. We all know that God intended Israel to be a nation of influence in the world. That is why he chose it, so it would be an instrument to declare the truth to the world. And it never had a greater opportunity than during the reigns of Solomon and David. Israel was an empire in those days.

Because these two men stand on this plateau together, it is natural to compare them. There are a lot of ways to draw comparisons between David and Solomon. In the realm of politics, Solomon was by far the superior figure. He was many, many times wealthier than his father; his influence extended over more territory; kings and queens and rulers from all over the world came to learn from him, amazed at his power and his wealth and his wisdom. In terms of stability there is no question that Solomon was a superior figure. All of David's reign was characterized by turmoil, upheaval, rebellion, hassle, problems, and war; Solomon never faced any turmoil. Solomon's was an unbroken, peaceful, powerful reign that influenced the world around him.

We can also compare these two men in terms of the records we have of them. Here, I think, an interesting comparison develops-- one that begins to shed light on why these two men were the way they were. Despite the overwhelming influence that Solomon had on his own day, he drops like a stone into the ocean in the rest of the Scriptures. He almost disappears. He is rarely quoted, rarely referred to by anyone else in scripture. Most of the references to him describe a geographical boundary of some kind. ("This is Solomon's porch" or "a pillar that Solomon erected", or something like that.) Solomon had very little influence on or interest for the rest of the writers of scripture, except to provide a negative example of some kind, such as, "Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these. "

David, on the other hand, is in almost every book of the Bible. You can hardly pick up a book or a passage of scripture without finding some reference to David. David's influence extended to every generation beyond his. Everywhere men were blessed because of David. God repeatedly refused to stamp out the nation of Israel because of David. "For David's sake I will hang in there with you guys, but I wouldn't (he implies) if it weren't for him." "For David's sake I will keep a descendant on the throne, but not because Israel deserves it." "For David's sake I will bring the people back from rebellion and exile." David influenced everybody that followed him; Solomon influenced hardly anyone.

Curiously, in secular literature, the opposite occurs. The people in the world remember Solomon. David Hubbard says, in an article in the New Bible Dictionary, "No hero of antiquity, with the possible exception of Alexander the Great, is so widely celebrated in folk literature. The Jewish, Arabian, and Ethiopian tales about Solomon's intellectual prowess and magical powers are legion." The world remembers Solomon; the Scriptures remember David. In trying to unravel why that is true, we come to some interesting conclusions.

The key event in Solomon's life reveals why this is so. It is recorded in 1 Kings 3: 3-14. Immediately following Solomon's ascent to the throne, he went to Gibeon and sacrificed a thousand animals. It was a tremendous event. The whole nation cast its eyes on Gibeon. There was phenomenal hoopla and celebration and dedications. The next night Solomon was asleep, no doubt tired out-- he had probably eaten too much, probably didn't feel all that sharp, and certainly was tired. In the middle of this night God came to him. There were no people around; there was nobody to see, nobody to influence. God asked Solomon a question (verse 5):

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

Let's back up a minute and check the scene. In verse 3, a penetrating statement is made about Solomon: "Now Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places." That statement characterizes Solomon's life. He loved the Lord. There is absolutely no question that Solomon loved the Lord. Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple is remarkable in its depth of understanding and love for God. But there is an "except" clause in verse 3, and that explains what always had been the case in Solomon's life. "He loved the Lord, except...." That doesn't mean that he didn't love the Lord; it means that he loved something else, too. He was a double-- minded man.

It is easy for me to see myself in this mold. I see others, too, who genuinely care for Jesus Christ, except they burn incense in the high places-- that is, they promote the worship of other gods. They love Jesus Christ, and they love Mammon, or security, or themselves, or something else. Solomon loved the Lord, except that he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places. And in this, the most important night in his whole life, he is face-- to-- face with his Lord, and God asks him this question: What would you like me to do for you?"

This sounds like an unusual scene, and it certainly is. I can't imagine waking up in the middle of the night-- especially since I hardly know what's going on for half an hour after I wake up-- and hearing the Lord ask me a question.

But, in another sense, this is not an unusual scene. This is exactly the question God asks every individual who has ever lived. Not quite as explicitly, but essentially, at one time or another, he asks us all the same question. He doesn't ask, "What can I get you to do for me? What service will you offer to me? What insight will you offer to me?" If we properly understand God, we know that he doesn't need anything. We could not conceivably add anything to him, or grant him anything that he doesn't already have. We could not influence him to do something that he does not desire to do. There isn't anything about us that we can give to him that will add to him. What we can do is let him give something to us. And so he asks, "What would you like me to give to you?"

As Christians, we have the opportunity to say, "Yes, God, I want you to give something to me." We will, or will not, let him give something to us, but that is the only option we have. We don't have the option of doing anything other than to receive from him. So this is a universal question. Solomon's answer is found in 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 lovingkindness, that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day."

Solomon looks back on the career and life of his father and he says, "Lord, you have been abundant in your goodness to my father. Your lovingkindness to him is phenomenal." Then, of all the blessings that David received from God, Solomon picks one, and I think he gives himself away when he does. He says, "You have reserved for him a son to sit on his throne. Of all the kind things-- and you have done uncounted kind things to David-- the kindest is that you gave him a son to sit on his throne."

The thing that impressed Solomon the most was that David had been king and had wielded influence and power and everybody around David knew him and responded to him and was affected by him. David was a king, and that is the thing about him that impressed Solomon because that is the thing he highlights in analyzing his father. Remember, Solomon loves God. He isn't just saying that David was powerful for his own sake, but that David was powerful for God's sake. David had done great things for the Lord. So Solomon asks to be a great king. "Make me wise, give me what it takes to be the kind of king who can have an impact on the world around me. I want to be influential for God's sake. Make me a wise king."

But I think that if God asked David the same question, he would have responded differently. In effect, without being asked verbally, David does answer the same question in Psalm 27:4.

**One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek;
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to meditate in His temple.**

David didn't start out as a king; David was a shepherd, to begin with. But the one thing he asked for, the driving concern of his life, was that he be in a love relationship with God, and that he be able to experience the emotional uplift of God's beauty and the intellectual stimulation that meditating on him provides. That is the desire that burned in David's heart-- not that he be a servant of God, not that he be an effective Christian, but that he be in love with Jesus. "I want to live where you live, Lord, whatever that means."

God can make an individual like that into a king. God took a shepherd who was so unimpressive to people around him that his father didn't even think of him when Samuel was looking for a king. God can take a man like that and easily make him into a king. If we start out wanting to be king, and say, "God, make me effective in your service, give me impact and wisdom, because I want to change the world for your sake," and we forget the first step, "Lord, make me in love with you; give me a heart for you," we are going to find ourselves like Solomon-- tragic figures.

David was not a very kingly king. He did all sorts of non-- regal things. His wife was embarrassed by him when he danced around without his royal clothing in front of the Ark. He was delighted that God was present in Israel, and just couldn't contain himself. It just got to him, but it embarrassed his wife. That was the most unkingly thing that she could imagine, and she gave him lots of trouble for doing it. Later on, when David was running from Absalom, a merchant named Shimai gave David a hard time and cursed him and told him what a loser he was. The mighty men around David said, "Man, let's cut this guy Shimai's head off. He's got to go! You're the king, David!" But David said, "No, God might be telling me something through this guy. I don't want to get so concerned about being king that I don't listen to the Lord anymore." So he let him live. And even afterwards, when he was back on the throne, he didn't put him to death.

David didn't act very much like a monarch. In fact, Solomon's point that God had preserved someone to sit on David's throne contradicts David's own practice, for David didn't do a very good job of providing himself with a successor. There nearly was a revolution because it hadn't occurred to David to insure a successor so his influence might extend after his death.

But God comments on Solomon's request for wisdom in verses 10-14:

And it was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said to him, "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. And I have also given you what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days. And if you walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and commandments, as your father David walked, then I will prolong your days."

The Lord was pleased with what Solomon asked for. The Lord displays remarkable humility, I think, in being pleased with so little. Knowing myself, I'd say most of the time I am like Solomon. I would much rather be a dynamic Christian than be in love with the Lord. And yet God is even satisfied with that. He is humble enough to accept even that from us. If he wasn't, there wouldn't be much left to accept. But God does comment further, after he says that he is pleased. He says, "Solomon, I am pleased, because you didn't ask for anything worse. You could have done worse, Solomon, and you didn't; I am pleased."

There is an account in the New Testament that parallels this, I believe-- the account of Mary and Martha. Remember how Martha was concerned with serving the Lord? She was in a dither, just working her fingers to the bone. She wanted to have an impact on the people around her, wanted to serve the Lord, wanted him to be happy with her service. The Lord doesn't rebuke Martha, he doesn't give her a hard time, but he teaches her something. He says, "Martha, there really is only one thing that is crucial, and Mary has chosen the good part." That is the kind of commendation Solomon did not receive. God never said, "Solomon, you have chosen the good part." He just didn't choose anything worse.

In many respects, I think this is like the church of Ephesus; described in Revelation. God says, "You have endured, you haven't bailed out, you have hated the right things." In a sense, those are negative commendations. "You haven't let go, you haven't fallen apart, you have succeeded in hating the right things. The problem is, you have lost your first love. You could be doing worse, and I am glad you are not, but there is a problem. You have given up that kind of relationship with Jesus Christ that says, 'Lord, I want to live where you live. Even if it means I will be a shepherd all my life, that's okay.' "

These things have helped me to relate to Solomon, to understand why he is such an enigma. Two things in particular strike me. One is that Solomon knew a tremendous amount of truth. Maybe no one knew more. All of us have been blessed by the Proverbs. They hold a tremendous amount of practical wisdom, particularly wisdom about how human beings ought to relate to one another. He knew an awful lot about that, but he was terrible when it came to putting it into practice. Probably the most profound passage on the nature of women, an in-- depth understanding of God's creation of woman and how God uses women to glorify himself, is found in Proverbs 31; and certain passages in the Song of Solomon explain what it means to have a delightful love for another. But nobody was worse than Solomon in putting what he knew into practice in his relationships with women. He understood a tremendous amount, but practiced very little. 1 Kings 11:4 says,

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.

Solomon's downfall was his relationship with women. Yet he knew a tremendous amount. I think this tells me that if I am determined to relate to others, if the condition of my heart is such that what I want more than anything else is to be effective in ministering to people for God's sake, if I am dominated by my relationship with people and my desire to be a wise king, I will not have enough staying power. That may work for a time, but at the end of my life I will find, as Solomon did, that things have run dry. Because ultimately I am more concerned about people than I am with the Lord.

Secondly, a comparison of the lives of these two men gives us insight on the nature of sin. Solomon and David could not have been more different in the way they related to sin. The book of Ecclesiastes gives Solomon's point of view. At one point he says, "Because of sin in humanity, because everything falls apart

eventually, because the good guys don't win more often than the bad guys, because life is so pervaded with problems -- because of sin, people who are dead are better off than those who are alive, and people who are never born are better off than those who are dead." That is the best answer Solomon could come up with. Don't ever be born.

Now David was a magnificent sinner; he was overwhelming in his ability to sin. He probably accomplished more for the sake of sin than this whole congregation could if we worked at it for the rest of our lives. But David knew how to be forgiven. His orientation was toward the Lord; though his heart was right, it didn't keep him from being deceived. But when he was deceived, and when he did sin, he could also write the words that are recorded in Psalm 51, "It is against you that I have sinned, O Lord." He sees that the problem is really between him and God. Even though tens of thousands of people have died as a result of his sin, it really comes down to an issue between him and God. David can also say, "If you will wash me, I will be white as snow." His heart belonged to the Lord, so there was an answer to sin for David.

Solomon could only despair, because he related only to men. It is much like liberal humanism today, a desire to serve man and promote justice and wisdom and goodness in the world. But based on that desire alone, a man eventually ends up in despair, "Why try?", and existential blackness. Men who love the Lord can say, "If you will wash me, I will be white as snow." There is hope for a world that is pervaded by sin.

I want to suggest a couple of areas where this truth might be applied. If we are the kind of people who are more concerned with being king, more concerned with being effective Christians, dynamic soul-- winners, or Bible study leaders of renown, than loving the Lord, then we are going to get on the bandwagon of things that produce immediate results. If we want to be a king, we've got to have something visible showing.

And if you are chained to enterprises that are going to produce visible results, then that is going to say some very striking things about your spiritual life. One is that it is going to affect the things you share. It is a lot easier to put on a happy face and share about our victorious Christian living than it is to talk about reality. Reality may include victorious Christian living, but it also is going to include pain and discipline. It is much easier to share only the victories because peoples' faces light up when you do. People love it and respond to it. You need results if you are going to be king. You've got to have positive feedback. You can't be like David and have generation after generation be blessed for your sake, because you're dead then, and you're not going to know about that. If you are going to be king, you need feedback. So you always will be chained to things that produce immediate results. It is much easier to talk to people than it is to pray. You can dash around talking to people, but it's hard to pray, because God may produce results that you are not aware of when you pray. It is much easier to teach Bible studies to people who are excited and can hardly wait to get hold of the truth than it is to love your enemy.

It is unbelievable how the Lord pointed this out to me. Last night I was studying my little heart out working away on this sermon. and a friend called and said, "Man, I've picked up this hitch hiker and he is really hurting. He is down-- and-- out, his hair is long and dirty, he hasn't had a bath for weeks, and he doesn't have anywhere to go-- can you help him?" I said, "Well, I'll make a few calls and see what I can do." So I half- heartedly zipped through a few phone calls, and nothing came of them. So X called my friend. "Don, gosh, I'm really sorry. I'm kind of busy working on this sermon. There'll be a lot of people at church tomorrow, you know, and, well, I've got to get this finished."

After I had hung up, I thought about it. "Gosh, here I am concerned with the thing that I'm going to do publicly, and not concerned at all with something that happens privately. What a great sermon illustration!" The craziest thing is that my friend called back this morning as I was going out the door. "Steve, I still don't know what to do with this guy." And I did it again! I thought, "This is a sermon illustration -- that's tremendous!" And I said, "Don, I haven't got time -- I've got to get going!" But that is the kind of person Solomon was. The things that you're drawn to are always the flashy things, the things that produce results.

Another way that we can apply what we have learned from the lives of David and Solomon is to ask ourselves, "What sort of influence do we have on the people around us? I think particularly-- and this is getting closer and closer to home with me all the time-- of children. Why is it that so many of God's people are first-- generation Christians? Why do so many pastors' children suffer difficulties? And not just pastors, but Christian leaders of

all kinds. I think that, in large measure, it comes back to the fact that subtly, the things we communicate to our children are: Be an effective Christian, do well in Sunday School, have an effect on your classmates, be powerful, be wise, be good, be a good Christian." Even if we don't mean that, our actions betray what we are thinking. We are not saying to them, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul."

Lastly, we need to recognize that the question the Lord asked Solomon is the same question that he asks everybody. "What would you like me to do for you? What can I do for you?" Eventually, I am going to have to come up with an answer. I think this question takes a lifetime to answer. Rather than saying, "Lord, make me a great king, make me an effective Christian," I have got to learn to say, and, Lord willing, I will learn to say,

One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek;
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord, And to meditate in His temple.
Lord, thank you for the Scriptures. What a great help they are to us as we learn from them
and respond to them. Lord, I ask that you give us hearts to respond rightly. Thank you that
you care for us so much that you are committed to making us into the kind of people who will
do what is right. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Catalog No. 3392
I Kings 3:3-14
May 9, 1976
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