

Solomon In All His Glory

“Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

“The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both riches and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”

1 Kings 3:7-14

As the world measures greatness Solomon’s reign marks the highpoint of Israel’s history. Israel had come a long way from the Patriarch Abraham standing on Mount Moriah with his only son, Isaac, bound and laid on an altar (Gen 22), to Solomon’s spare-no-expense dedication of the temple on that very same site (2 Chron 3:1). The hardships of Israel’s past are behind them. Egyptian bondage and wilderness wanderings are part of their history. Philistine conflicts and the moral and spiritual chaos of the era of the Judges are now a distant memory. David, a man after God’s own heart, blessed his son Solomon with a God-focused legacy that set the stage for Israel to experience “rest” from all their adversaries and disasters (1 Kings 5:4). The Lord God continued to fulfill his promises to Abraham and Moses (1 Kings 8:56) and under Solomon, Israel’s third king, a great nation stretched from the Euphrates to Egypt. David, the warrior king, was

succeeded by Solomon, whose name comes from the Hebrew word *shalom* and means “peace” or “peaceable.”

Solomon defined an era of tremendous blessing and peace, not only in his name, but in his very being. He was known for his God-given wisdom and for his unprecedented wealth. He is credited with writing Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. He presided over numerous building projects and promoted culture like no other king in Israel before or after him. In many ways he represented both the blessing of God and the spirit of the age. If anyone could be said to have ruled over Israel’s “glory days,” it was Solomon.

A millennium before the birth of Christ Israel reached its political, social and religious zenith under the rule of Solomon. David’s son built wisely on Israel’s heritage. Like his father, he expressed his love for the Law of God in prose and poetry. He was a prolific writer, producing some three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs (1 Kings 4:32). His authorship of Proverbs bears powerful testimony to the importance of the message of Moses and the significance of Deuteronomy in the moral and spiritual life of Israel. His focus on building the Temple and establishing worship in Jerusalem was based on the importance of the Tabernacle and the religious ritual prescribed in Leviticus. His ability to organize the nation efficiently reminds us of the emphasis in the book of Numbers on God’s administration of Israel in the wilderness. Solomon proved to be an effective communicator, administrator, and visionary. He was the architect for Israel’s new society. He established Israel’s boundaries and gave her a reputation among the nations for wisdom, wealth and power. He not only centered Israel’s religion in the Temple but he put Jerusalem on the map as Israel’s capital. It was a time of growth and prosperity. “The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy” (1 Kings 4:20). Under Solomon’s rule and because of God’s blessing, Israel appeared to reach its highest potential. Success was measured in wealth, wisdom, international recognition and political stability.

By any human standard, Solomon was a success. Between King David’s passionate faith and the powerful proclamation of the prophets, Solomon’s peaceable kingdom was a prototype of the “rest” God promises his people. Solomon’s reign was but a harbinger of the shalom to come, his splendor, only a faint hint of the majesty of God. Yet his success was a mixed blessing for Israel. To the degree that he foreshadowed the coming glory of God, he was a reflection

of the wisdom of God, but to the degree that he expressed self-indulgence and oppressive materialism he displayed the excesses of passion and power gone tragically awry. It is something of a mystery how one man could be so wise, and yet so foolish. How could the author of such penetrating insights into human nature and the fear of God, find love and meaning so illusive? It was as if Solomon was torn between insight and indulgence, fulfillment and futility, the fear of the Lord and the power of his ego. Most of us have chosen to focus on a few impressive snap shots of his life, such as his request for wisdom and his moving prayer at the dedication of the temple, but the real story behind Solomon is his conflicted soul. In the end he impresses us as an inexplicable contradiction, a paradox of prayer and passion, a man whose life was guided far more by the spirit of the age than the Spirit of the God he knew so well.

This is the story that especially concerns us because we face this same contradiction in ourselves. When the apostle Paul wrote Romans 7 he was thinking of himself, but he could have used Solomon as a prime example. Paul wrote, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Solomon's life captured the extremes of that awful struggle and proved the foolishness of looking to a great man for salvation and significance. Only one person can rescue us "from this body of death." The apostle exclaimed, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" We have always needed the One greater than Solomon!

Solomon's Throne Established

Long before Solomon asked for wisdom he was blessed by the providential care of God. The author of Kings made it clear that Solomon's story did not begin with his dream at Gibeon. The power and direction in Solomon's life was found not in himself, but in God. Solomon was neither a self-made man, nor a product of divine determination. The will of God was far too dynamic and personal in his life to be reduced to neat formulas.

Like Solomon, we are part of a vast salvation history story. We are not actors on a stage reading scripted lines, but people embraced by the love and power of God. At birth, Solomon was named, Jedidiah, which meant, "loved by the Lord" (2 Sam 12:25). He was the blessing that came out of David's raw, unadulterated evil.

He was “chosen” and “dearly loved” by God, long before he ever dreamed of just how dependent he was upon the Lord God. Interestingly, Solomon’s request for wisdom comes after the kingdom was firmly established in his hands. By the time he made his famous appeal, Solomon was well aware of the mystery of God and the mess of the human condition.

Any thought that Solomon was handed the kingdom on a silver platter is quickly dispelled by the opening narrative in 1 Kings. King David was slowly dying. He was too feeble to stay warm and too much in denial to prepare for an orderly succession to the throne. David is the picture of weakness, kept warm by the body heat of his young nurse Abishag, out of touch with his sons, and unaware of the political intrigue swirling around him. By default he had created a potentially dangerous leadership vacuum. Like his older half-brother Absalom, Adonijah conspired to take over the throne (2 Sam 3:4). He was handsome, ambitious and with his regal escort of fifty men, clever enough to take a page out of Absalom’s play book. In a name-it-and-claim-it power move, he declared, “I will be king.” Having won the support of Joab, the military commander, and Abiathar the priest, he decided not to wait for David’s death but to ambitiously celebrate his succession to the throne with a sacrificial meal. He invited all the important men of Judah, with the exception of the prophet Nathan, Benaiah, the captain of the king’s body guard, and his half-brother Solomon. Undoubtedly Adonijah was aware of the long-standing rumor that Solomon was designated to succeed David. Solomon’s special significance was implied at his birth when the Lord gave him the name, Jedidiah (“loved by the Lord”) through the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12:25).

When Nathan heard about Adonijah’s succession celebration he went straight to Bathsheba, Solomon’s mother, and advised her to see the king. Her words to David reflect how much was at stake. “My lord the king, the eyes of all Israel are on you, to learn from you who will sit on the throne of my lord the king after him. Otherwise, as soon as my lord the king is laid to rest with his fathers, I and my son Solomon will be treated as criminals” (1 Kings 1:20-21). Nathan’s pre-arranged follow-up visit to the king prompted David to act. He solemnly gave his word to Bathsheba, “As surely as the Lord lives, who has delivered me out of every trouble, I will surely carry out today what I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel: Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne in my place” (1 Kings 1:29-30). Then David ordered Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the commander, to assemble a great company and anoint

Solomon king over Israel. “Blow the trumpet and shout, ‘Long live King Solomon!’” (1 Kings 1:34).

As they say, “Timing is everything.” Before Adonijah’s feast in the Kidron Valley had concluded Jerusalem had erupted into joyous celebration over Solomon’s anointing. He had already entered the city on the king’s mule. He had already sat on David’s throne and the bedridden king had already pronounced the benediction, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has allowed my eyes to see a successor on my throne today” (1 Kings 1:48). When news of all this reached Adonijah’s supporters everyone was alarmed and immediately dispersed. Fearful that Solomon would do to him what he had probably planned to do Solomon, Adonijah fled and “took hold of the horns of altar.” His carefully worded plea for mercy acknowledged Israel’s new king, “Let King Solomon swear to me today that he will not put his servant to death with the sword” (1 Kings 1:51). Solomon spared Adonijah’s life, saying, “If he shows himself to be a worthy man, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground; but if evil is found in him, he will die” (1 Kings 1:52). Adonijah might have gone on with his life, but he couldn’t resist trying to undermine Solomon’s leadership by asking an unsuspecting Bathsheba for a favor, “Please ask King Solomon—he will not refuse you—to give me Abishag the Shunammite as my wife” (1 Kings 2:17). Like Absalom who had slept with David’s concubines in order to shame his father and embolden the opposition, Adonijah wanted to use Abishag for political leverage. Solomon saw right through the scheme and ordered Adonijah’s immediate death (1 Kings 2:24).

Shortly before he died, David gave a final charge to Solomon. It was a sober reminder that leadership is not for the passive and faint-hearted. “So be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and where you go, and that the Lord may keep his promise to me: ‘If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel’” (1 Kings 2:2-4). Following this charge, David gave very practical political counsel regarding Joab, who had been in on the plot to make Adonijah king, and Shimei, who had taken advantage of Absalom’s rebellion, and cursed David (2 Sam 16:7-12). He challenged Solomon to take action against both men. Some commentators have seen this as vindictive on David’s part, that he “blackened” his record on his deathbed (Dentan, The

Layman's Bible Commentary, vol.7, 1964, p.21). But it is more reasonable to conclude that David suspected that both Joab and Shimei would seriously undermine Solomon's authority if given the chance.

As far as the author of Kings was concerned Solomon's actions were in complete accord with the wisdom of God. In his removal of Abiathar from the priesthood, he fulfilled the word of the Lord about the house of Eli (2 Kings 2:27; see 1 Sam 2:30-33). By ordering Joab's death, in spite of the fact that he took hold of the horns of the altar (Ex 21:14), Solomon served justice on a man who had treacherously killed two generals, Abner (2 Sam 3:27) and Amasa (2 Sam 20:10). And by testing Shimei's respect for the authority of the Lord's Anointed, Solomon permitted Shimei to convict himself (1 Kings 2:36-46). In each case, Solomon executed justice and removed a potential threat to his rule. There was little doubt in the author's mind that these were necessary steps toward a positive conclusion: "The kingdom was now firmly established in Solomon's hands" (2:46).

A Discerning Heart

From the start ambiguity and compromise color our assessment of Solomon. We are told that he "made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter" (1 Kings 3:1). The Law of Moses was explicit about not marrying Canaanites: "Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land; for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices. And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same" (Ex 34:15-16). The law did not specifically forbid Solomon's marriage to an Egyptian princess, but such an alliance was bound to increase his vulnerability. The message of Moses clearly warned against being enamored by the wealth and culture of Egypt. "The king...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 gold" (Deut 17:16-17). For whatever reasons, Solomon refused to be convicted by these commands and warnings and pursued a course of action more in keeping with the spirit of the times than the Word of God.

Solomon was commended for showing "his love for the Lord by walking

according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places” (3:3). Since the temple in Jerusalem had not yet been built and the high place at Gibeon had become home to the Tabernacle (2 Chron 1:3) it must have seemed logical to Solomon to worship Yahweh at Gibeon. The compromise was subtle, but significant. The surrounding cultures considered the high places closer to the gods, but for the Israelites the sign of God’s nearness was the transportable Tent of Meeting. Nature and geography did not dictate spirituality. The Israelites had been commanded to destroy the high places (Num 33:52), and not use them for the worship of Yahweh. But by following indigenous religious practices and worshiping on the high places, Israel made it seem like Yahweh was just another tribal deity.

King David had wisely moved the ark of God to Jerusalem, but Solomon chose the high place at Gibeon to pitch the Tent of Meeting (1 Kings 3:4). Solomon meant well, but his excessive display of religious zeal did not remove the fact that Israel had no business worshiping Yahweh on the high places. A thousand burnt offerings at Gibeon may have impressed the people, but the extravagant display of piety did not impress the Lord God. David had prayed: “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” David’s vision focused on Jerusalem as Israel’s God-centered alternative to the high places. “In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; and bulls will be offered on your altar” (Ps 51:16-19).

It is significant that after a full day of ritual and liturgy at Gibeon’s high place that Solomon experienced a turning point in his life. In the quiet of the night, in the deep recesses of his consciousness, Solomon heard the Lord God’s invitation to receive what all the pomp and ceremony of Gibeon could not give him: “Ask for whatever you want me to give you” (1 Kings 3:5).. In spite of the fact that Solomon was immersed in compromising strategies and ambiguous priorities, God took the initiative to encounter him at Gibeon. The incident is a reminder of the mercy of God that accommodates his goodness to us. As David prayed, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities...As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, and he remembers that we are dust” (Ps 103:8-14). Because

of the patience and love of God, Solomon is led into a new and more dependent relationship with the Lord.

Like Solomon, today's followers of Jesus find themselves in compromising situations. There is often a gap between who we are in our professional, religious, and social life and the person we know God wants us to be. Gibeon represents the way of life we feel forced to lead because of other people's expectations. We hedge and compromise because we don't have the courage to disappoint people and receive their disapproval. The "high places" dictate more about our lives than we care to admit. Yet it was there at Gibeon in the middle of the night that God initiated a transforming encounter with Solomon.

Solomon may never have been as fully aware as he was in that dream. Free from public scrutiny and royal protocol, he could honestly and humbly admit his need. "Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties." Two facts overwhelmed Solomon: his personal inability to rule and the greatness of the task. "Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number." He did not use these facts as an excuse to abdicate his responsibility, but as the reason for his request. "So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (1 Kings 3:7-9).

In this instance, Solomon is a memorable example for Christ's followers. We are reminded of the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Mt 7:7-8). Like Solomon we need to be honest about our inability to measure up to the task before us, but that doesn't free us from our responsibility. Such honesty only serves to increase our dependence upon the wisdom of God. In the words of James, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). James went on to contrast worldly "wisdom," a product of envy and selfish ambition, with heavenly wisdom, which is "first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17).

It was the very lack of greed and ambition that the Lord God commended in

Solomon's request. "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both riches and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life" (1 Kings 3:11-14). Far from any preconceived notion of a god who was reluctant to bless, the Lord God was more than ready to bless Solomon to the full. When Solomon woke up, he realized that he had been dreaming, but his immediate response proved that he didn't dismiss it as just a dream. Solomon celebrated his very real encounter with God by hastening back to Jerusalem to stand before the "ark of the Lord's covenant." He sealed that late-night blessing by returning to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. He demonstrated his heart's commitment devotionally by offering sacrifices to God and relationally by giving a feast for his court. Solomon was a happy man. He had caught a glimpse of what God could do for him and through him. At Gibeon Solomon presided over the ritual of worship but in Jerusalem he worshiped the Lord God with a discerning heart.

Solomon's Wisdom

As anyone can clearly tell the author of Kings was delighted to tell the story of Solomon's wisdom. He began with the test case of the two prostitutes and ended with the Queen of Sheba's examination. Solomon's insights, abilities, and achievements were so great that they captured the imagination, not only of Israel, but the surrounding nations. Solomon's wisdom could be measured three ways: First and most importantly, it fulfilled God's call to pursue justice and righteousness; second, it affirmed the fact that all truth is God's truth; and third, it was extremely successful by the world's standards.

Immediately following Solomon's worship experience in Jerusalem we are given a specific example of Solomon's wise and discerning heart (1 Kings 3:16-28). Two women came before Solomon; they were prostitutes living by themselves in the same house, nursing their babies who were only a few days old. One claimed that the other accidentally suffocated her own baby by lying on him and then exchanged her dead baby for the living baby asleep at his mother's side. In the morning the claimant awoke to find the other woman's dead baby lying beside her

and her healthy baby in the other woman's arms.

It would be difficult to find a more emotionally charged issue. One woman's baby has died and the other woman's baby has been stolen. Both women are painfully threatened in the depths of their being. It would also be difficult to find a more impossible case to solve. Without blood tests and supporting witnesses the truth is locked up in the soul. Who is telling the truth? Has one woman accidentally smothered her child and frantically stolen another, or has the other woman deviously devised to use the judicial system to gain an innocent woman's child through false accusation, because her own child died?

As challenging as the case may be, we marvel that Solomon heard the case at all. The two women standing before him were prostitutes. This helps explain their housing situation and how they came to be sleeping alone with their two babies. It also tells us that they were poor. Prostitutes were usually slaves, who had been sold by their destitute parents. They may never have had the opportunity to marry. Yet the description bears more significance than that they were poor.

In the book of Proverbs a prostitute personifies evil and foolishness. She represents the seduction of evil, the sensual antithesis to everything wisdom and purity stand for. Nevertheless the pursuit of justice and righteousness extended to these two prostitutes regardless of their moral and economic lifestyle. Solomon heard their case. He did not avoid the high calling of setting things right for the needy; that was his duty before the Lord God.

After Solomon summarized the case, he did what no one would have expected. He ordered a sword and commanded that the living child be slashed in half. Suddenly the picture of Israel's enlightened monarch, intelligent and urbane, crumbles. We seem suddenly to enter the world of ruthless power and arbitrary cruelty. Is this how justice is pursued? His strategy had all the appearance of that of a tyrant impatient with a no-win case. Kill the child and be done with it. Of course, what appeared to be arbitrary and cruel was actually a brilliant move that boldly set up the moment of truth.

The effectiveness of Solomon's moral risk-taking depended on the moral sensitivity of the innocent mother. Her pursuit of justice could not have been more personal, more heart-wrenching. Every ounce of emotional energy was expended to make her plea and win back her son. But after she had made her case for

justice, she was asked for something more. Solomon's strategy demanded from her a painful, almost unthinkable decision. Her moral conscience took her beyond her maternal rights and guided her love to the ultimate sacrifice. The indirect quest for truth carried an obvious painful necessity for her. She had to give up her son to the evil woman to save his life. She came seeking justice; now she must give up her son to the evil woman to save his life. She had the moral sense, the brave resolve, to give up her child to let him live. When she cried out spontaneously, "Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don't kill him!" the suspense was broken, the truth known. The true love of the real mother emerged from the painful, moral sensitivity of the innocent woman. The hard-won verdict was easy. Solomon only needed to state the obvious: "Give the living baby to the first woman. Do not kill him; she is his mother" (1 Kings 3:27). Of all the things that Solomon accomplished, pursuing justice was what impressed people the most. "When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice" (1 Kings 3:28).

At the other end of the spectrum, but still very much within the scope of God's wisdom, was the phenomenal success of Solomon's intellectual, administrative and architectural achievements. We are told that "God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore" (1 Kings 4:29). He was the wisest man of the East. Intellectuals from all over journeyed to Solomon's court to discuss everything from music to agriculture. He excelled in poetry, music, botany, and zoology. He was exceptionally endowed by God with artistic creativity and analytical skills. Solomon modeled the principle that all truth is God's truth wherever it is found.

An illustration of Solomon's world-class fame is found in the story of the Queen of Sheba, who combined her intellectual quest with a huge commercial venture. She traveled from South Arabia to Jerusalem to see for herself the wisdom of Solomon and she was not disappointed. If anything, she was overwhelmed. From the caliber of his advisors to the administration of his court, Solomon personified the pursuit of excellence. She admitted to being skeptical of Solomon's reputation, but having actually heard his wisdom and witnessed his achievements she couldn't say enough about him. "Indeed, not even the half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom!" Significantly she didn't stop there, but went on to praise the

God of Solomon. “Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness” (1 Kings 10:7-10). The queen wisely observed that God had made Solomon king for a purpose. His intellectual brilliance and the moral order of his administration were intentionally dedicated to maintaining justice and righteousness.

At this high point in the story of Solomon a crucial observation can be made. In a unique and compelling way Solomon embodied the fullness of God’s wisdom. The emphasis upon his wisdom is an important corrective to any Christian who would disparage the mind and argue against education. The fear of the Lord does not lead to intellectual suicide or narrow mindedness. On the contrary, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). A wise and discerning heart is by definition inspired by the Author of Life to pursue truth, knowing that God’s creation is shot through with rationality and God’s redemption meets the real needs of the human condition. From fossils to forgiveness the Christian seeks understanding. Wisdom centered in the Lord God opens creation up to study and exploration, calls for justice and excellence in the administration of human affairs, and pursues maturity and righteousness. Solomon’s life is an important reminder to cultivate the Christian mind—a mind trained, informed, equipped to discern the truth and meaning of life in all its fullness, to the glory of God.

With that said, we affirm that our hope does not lie in human intelligence and brilliance. Solomon is a great example of the importance of the mind, but he was never meant to be Israel’s savior. Nor were we ever meant to place our trust and confidence in great men like Solomon, no matter how brilliant they might be. Our faith and trust, our hope and courage, lies totally and exclusively in the living God. This underscores the critical difference between Solomon and Jesus which our Savior emphasized in his teaching. He said to the scribes and Pharisees that the “Queen of the South will rise in judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here” (Mt 12:42). With all that we have said about Solomon’s reputation and the zenith of Israel’s development under his rule Jesus’ comparison was striking. One can only imagine the mocking derision Jesus received from the teachers of the Law for making such a comparison. How could he possibly impress the Queen of Sheba as one greater than Solomon?

The difference between Jesus and Solomon was not only a matter of degree but of

kind. Solomon was the recipient of God's wisdom, but Jesus was and is the essence of God's wisdom. Solomon could never say what Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Nor could it be said of Solomon what the apostle declared, that in Christ, "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). Solomon in all his glory didn't come close to the glory of Christ.

Solomon's Worship

Judging from the biblical narrative Solomon's greatest achievement was the building and dedication of the Temple. He undertook to do what his father could not do. He wrote to Hiram king of Tyre, "You know that because of the wars waged against my father David from all sides, he could not build a temple for the Name of the Lord his God until the Lord put his enemies under his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me peace on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster" (1 Kings 5:3-4). King David had both the desire and the means to build the temple, but the will of God spoken by the prophet Nathan prevented him from doing so. "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling" (2 Samuel 7:5-6). David understood a specific reason behind the Lord's rhetorical question. "God said to me, 'You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood'" (1 Chron 28:3). However this did not discourage David from setting aside enormous resources for his son to build the Temple. In addition to his own commitment of 110 tons of gold and 260 tons of silver, he challenged the leaders of Israel to give close to 200 tons of gold, 375 tons of silver, 675 tons of bronze, and 3,750 tons of iron, plus precious stones (1 Chron 29:3-9).

Given his father's strong desire to build the temple himself, and the Lord God's specific promise to David that his son would build "a house for my Name" (2 Sam 7:13), and the stockpiling of vast resources dedicated to the temple's construction, Solomon must have been keenly aware of his administration's number one priority. All indications point to the fact that he pursued this great undertaking with wisdom and zeal. His first task was to establish a mutually beneficial trading arrangement with Hiram king of Tyre. In exchange for vast amounts of wheat and olive oil, Israel received all the cedar and pine necessary to build the temple and Solomon's palace. King Solomon conscripted 30,000 Israelites to work in

Lebanon on rotating shifts. 10,000 men a month, under Adoniram, cut the wood and floated it down the coast. In addition, 150,000 non-Israelite slave laborers, with 3,300 supervisors, cut and hauled “large blocks of quality stone to provide a foundation of dressed stone for the temple” (1 Kings 5:15-17; see 9:20-21; 2 Chron 2:16-17; 8:1-9). The actual building of the temple began 4 years into Solomon’s reign and 480 years after the Exodus (1 Kings 6:1). Both the timing and the place were significant. Twelve, forty year epochs would impress any Israelite as very special timing indeed! The temple was built on Moriah, a place made famous by the worship experience of Abraham (Gen 22) and David (2 Sam 24:25). In keeping with the sacred significance of the work “no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple site” (1 Kings 6:7). Costly steps were taken to remind everyone of the nature of the project.

The model for the temple was the tabernacle. Although its dimensions were about twice as big, its layout was much the same and the meaning of each room and its furniture was based on the Tent of Meeting. The temple was 90 feet long, thirty feet wide and forty-five feet high. A portico extended the width by 30 feet and the front of the temple by 15 feet.

Before the interior of the temple could be described the Word of the Lord reminded Solomon of something far more important than his building project. “As for this temple you are building, if you follow my decrees, carry out my regulations and keep all my commands and obey them, I will fulfill through you the promise I gave to David your father. And I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel” (1 Kings 6:12-13). This interjection is an important reminder to the people of God today. Instead of reading, “As for this temple you are building” we could read, “As for this church you are administering” or “choir you are conducting” or “class you are teaching” or any number of other projects we ostensibly undertake *for God*. It takes diligence to assure that “temple building” or “church work” does not get in the way of our real faithfulness to the Lord.

The inner sanctuary, or The Most Holy Place, was a perfect cube, 30 feet by 30 feet by 30 feet. It was paneled with cedar, overlaid with gold, and illuminated only by candle light. This windowless golden cube housed the most important symbol of God’s presence, the Ark of the Testimony. It was lined and covered with pure gold and it was not to be touched by human hands but moved by specially made poles. It measured only three feet, six and a half inches long and two feet, two and

a quarter inches wide and high. Its lid was called the atonement cover and its contents included a copy of the commandments. It signified the Word and Sacrament of God. From its name, shape, and contents, the Ark of Testimony symbolized Yahweh's presence and pointed to the divine work of redemption and revelation necessary for the salvation of God's people. It was never thought of as a substitute for the invisible reality of God nor as an object of worship and devotion. Everything in the temple pointed to the holy character of the one and only living God.

Solomon commissioned Hiram, whose mother was a widow from the tribe of Naphtali, to work in gold, silver, brass, iron, stone, wood, and fabric (2 Chron 2:14). In the tradition of the skilled craftsmanship of Bezalel and Oholiab (Ex 35:30f), Hiram supervised all the casting, carving, engraving and weaving that went into adorning the temple. He erected two 27 foot bronze pillars in front of the temple and named them Jakin, meaning "He establishes," and Boaz, "In Him is strength" (2 Chron 3:17; 1 Kings 7:15-16).

Like the Tabernacle, Solomon's temple was intentionally designed to be idol-resistant. There were no objects of worship or images to bow before. The hand carved, gold covered cherubim, palm trees and open flowers which adorned the walls of the temple celebrated God's creation. The temple was meant to be a symbol of the presence of the invisible God, not a substitute for God. It was not built to memorialize Solomon, but to center all of Israel on the covenant-keeping, prayer-hearing, life-redeeming Holy God.

As important as the construction, layout, and description of the temple was to the author, the heart of the story in both Kings and Chronicles is worship. The seven year project was a prelude to Israel's major work, which had always been worship and obedience. Literally tens of thousands had worked on the temple, but all Israel gathered for its dedication. Strong hands had cut cedar and stone. Skilled hands had carved cherubim, lions and palm trees, but no hands accomplished more than when Solomon "spread out his hands toward heaven" and prayed, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way" (1 Kings 8:23). The passion of the biblical text concentrates on the meaning of the temple rather than the building itself. Nothing was meant to impress the reader more than the acts of worship surrounding the dedication: the priestly processional of the ark of the Lord into the Holy Holies, Solomon's prayer

of dedication and the abundant sacrifices made to dedicate the temple of the Lord. All that had been said about administration and architecture, forced labor and skilled craftsmanship, reached its culmination and climax in the worship of the Lord God.

On his knees before the altar of the Lord and in the presence of the entire assembly of Israel, Solomon prayed. “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” Solomon knew that the temple did not limit or confine God to space and time. Years later the prophet Isaiah stressed this truth. “This is what the Lord says: ‘Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?’ declares the Lord” (Isa 66:1-2). The prophets attacked the notion that the temple guaranteed the presence of God and the success of Israel (Micah 3:11-12). Jeremiah proclaimed, “Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!’” (Jer 7:4). The perceived danger was that the temple would become a substitute for seeking the real presence of God or a distraction from honoring God in holy living. The prophets knew that if the temple became an end in itself it had become an idol.

Solomon reflected these prophetic concerns in his prayer. There are many things that his dedicatory prayer might have consisted of, such as honoring the laborers who built the temple, memorializing those who gave toward the temple, and blessing the various features of the temple, but there was no religious small talk in his prayer. This was definitely not a “cut-flower” prayer. Instead, King Solomon concentrated exclusively on seeking God. “Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. *Hear from heaven*, your dwelling place, and when you hear forgive” (1 Kings 8:30). Solomon spelled out a series of negative and difficult situations that called for prayer, such as when a person wrongs his neighbor or when Israel is defeated in war or when the country is afflicted with disaster or disease. Solomon was obviously well aware of Israel’s propensity to sin. Nor could he be accused of under-estimating the power of evil. He was also well aware of Israel’s responsibility to be a testimony to the nations (8:41-43). On behalf of the people, Solomon prayed for justice, righteousness, healing and strength, but he mainly prayed for forgiveness. The refrain that runs through out the prayer is not repetitive, but earnest, “forgive your people, who have sinned against you.” The essence of his prayer is summed up

well in the conclusion: “May your eyes be open to your servant’s plea and to the plea of your people Israel, and may you listen to them whenever they cry out to you. For you singled them out from all the nations of the world to be your own inheritance, just as you declared through your servant Moses when you, O Sovereign Lord, brought our fathers out of Egypt” (8:52-53).

After fourteen days of ceremonial sacrifices and celebrations before the Lord, Solomon sent the people away. “They blessed the king and then went home, joyful and glad in heart for all the good the Lord had done for his servant David and his people Israel” (8:66). But as far as the author of Kings was concerned the true conclusion to the dedication of the temple came after everyone had gone home, when the Lord appeared to Solomon “a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon” (9:2). The Lord’s response to Solomon was both encouraging and sobering. He affirmed, “I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.” But then went on to repeat a longstanding promise and re-issue a well-known warning: “If you walk before me in integrity of heart and uprightness....I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever...But if you or your sons turn away from me...I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and will reject this temple I have consecrated in my Name.”

The temple had been built to last, but its permanency rested, not on its well laid foundations, but on the steadfast love of the Lord and the faithfulness of the people of God. Disobedience would bring the temple down faster than any earthquake. “...Though this temple is now imposing,” warned the Lord, “all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff and say, ‘Why has the Lord done such a thing to this land and to this temple?’ People will answer, ‘Because they have forsaken the Lord their God, who brought their fathers out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them—that is why the Lord brought all this disaster on them’” (9:3-9). The warning is so direct that many modern textual scholars believe that the author is putting words in the mouth of the Lord, writing them into the text long after the destruction of the temple. In this respect, these modern scholars are like little children who claim that their parents never warned them of the consequences of disobedience even though their parents had warned them many times. Make no mistake, Solomon knew the consequences of turning away from the Lord. His communion with the Lord God and his powerful worship experiences made that truth undeniable.

Solomon reflected prophetic concerns in his dedicatory prayer but he is remembered by Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in his speech to the Sanhedren, as presiding over a problematic development in Israel's spirituality and worship. True, David asked to build the temple and was prevented from doing so. "But it was Solomon who built the house for him." For Stephen the transition from the tabernacle of Testimony to Solomon's temple proved critical and contributed to their stiff-necked attitude. Israel forgot that "the Most High does not live in houses made by men." In his message Stephen quoted the prophet Isaiah, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?" (Acts 7:47-50). As far as Stephen was concerned the turning point occurred under Solomon's administration. He traced Israel's spiritual decline and apostasy to Solomon's era and forcefully declared, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" When Stephen accused them of murdering the Righteous One they went wild and dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death (Acts 7:51-58).

Solomon's Wealth and Women

Solomon didn't experience life in neatly divided categories of wisdom, worship, wealth and women. Although it can be reasonable argued that Solomon was far closer to the Lord in his early years than in his later years, there is no clear turning point in his life that identifies a deliberate break from the Lord. In all likelihood he worshiped regularly at the temple right up to the end of his life (9:25; 2 Chron 8:13). But beginning early his life, Solomon accumulated resources and relationships that turned his heart away from the Lord.

The author of 1 Kings seemed to have a subtle and paradoxical way of indicating Solomon's compromised condition. On the one hand Solomon was commended for seeking a discerning heart, but we are also told that he married Pharaoh's daughter and continued the practice of worshiping on the high places. Another implied compromise can be found in the description of success. Solomon's rule meant peace and prosperity for all of Israel, everyone "lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree." This was an apt description of well-being for the people of Israel, but the author immediately added a very contrasting picture of Solomon's success. "Solomon had four thousand stalls for chariot horses, and twelve thousand horses" (4:25-26). This description can not help but recall the

warning in the Law of Moses against the king acquiring “great numbers of horses for himself” (Deut 17:16). It also looks forward to the description in Ecclesiastes of simple life based on the blessing of God rather than the foolish striving of man (Eccl 3:9-14; 5:18-20). Another suggestive contrast is the fact that it took Solomon seven years to build the temple, but it took thirteen years to complete the construction of his palace (6:38-7:1). Nothing is actually said, but the implication is that Solomon worked harder and longer on his own palace than the temple. The author also implied that what began as an ideal business relationship between Solomon and Hiram king of Tyre (5:1-18) ended poorly. Apparently Solomon gave Hiram twenty towns in Galilee in partial payment for all the cedar and pine and gold that Hiram had supplied. “But when Hiram went from Tyre to see the towns that Solomon had given him, he was not pleased with them. ‘What kind of towns are these you have given me, my brother?’ he asked. And he called them the Land of Cabul [good-for-nothing]...” (9:12-13). We are left with the distinct impression that Hiram did everything he could to facilitate Solomon’s building projects, but in the end Solomon short-changed him. In these instances, the case against Solomon may not be overt, but it is clearly implied that both his rule and his character leave a lot to be desired.

Another way the author of Kings assessed Solomon was by the numbers. It seems that everything he did was measured by statistics. At the dedication of the temple he sacrificed 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats (1 Kings 8:63). Even his wisdom was assessed in numbers. “He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five” (1 Kings 4:32). Each of Solomon’s twelve district governors provided provisions for the royal court for one month a year. On a daily basis it is estimated that the court consumed 28,000 lbs. of bread (90 cors) and 21,000 lbs of meat (4:23). Based on these amounts it has been estimated that there were approximately 14,000 persons in Solomon’s court (Keil-Delitzsch, p.52). The prophet Samuel had warned that a king would “take” Israel’s sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses. And he would “take” her daughters “to be perfumers and cooks and bakers” (1 Sam 8:11,13). Under Solomon, conscription into the king’s service evidently took place on a large scale, this included the 30,000 Israelites who labored in Lebanon four months a year, plus the 150,000 Canaanites who worked in the quarries. Other key indicators of Solomon’s power and wealth included his 4,000 stalls for chariot horses, his 1400 chariots, and his twelve thousand riding horses (1 Kings 4:26; 10:26; 2 Chron 1:14). Solomon’s financial resources were also impressive. One commercial venture to Ophir (southern Arabia) brought back around \$155 million in gold (1

Kings 9:28). The Queen Sheba gave the king \$44 million in gold, plus “large quantities of spices, and precious stones (1 Kings 10:10). Solomon’s annual gold intake was estimated to be worth \$242 million and that did “not include the revenues from merchants and traders and from all the Arabian kings and governors of the land” (1 Kings 10:14-15). Solomon must have concluded that the command of God prohibiting the king from accumulating large amounts of silver and gold did not apply to him (Deut 17:17). Clearly, one way to show Solomon’s priorities was to let the numbers speak for themselves.

The author of Kings even used numbers to describe Solomon’s great throne, which he had made out of ivory and overlaid with fine gold. We are told that the king ascended six steps, adorned with twelve lion statues, one at either end of each step (10:20). All in all Solomon’s bottom line showed wealth and fame. “King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth” (10:23). You recall that at Gibeon the Lord God promised Solomon “both riches and honor”—so that in [his] lifetime he would “have no equal among kings” (3:13). But clearly at some point Solomon’s wealth became more of an obsession than a blessing, and his wealth, rather than his wisdom, became the measure of the man. Albert Einstein wisely observed, “Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts.” This was certainly true for Solomon whose splendor could be assessed better by the numbers than by his character and devotion to Yahweh.

Of all the numbers used to describe Solomon, the one that stands out the most in people’s minds, is his one thousand wives and concubines. Throughout his reign Solomon violated Yahweh’s specific command against both multiple marriages and intermarriage with the Canaanites (Deut 17:17; Joshua 23:8). In spite of the clear biblical warning that intermarriage with the Canaanites would turn his heart after their gods, Solomon “loved many foreign women” and “held fast to them in love” (1 Kings 11:1-2). It is truly amazing that Solomon, after experiencing God’s incredible blessing in wisdom and wealth, would follow Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. How could the same man who dedicated the temple with such passion for Yahweh, build high places for the gods of his foreign wives and offer sacrifices to idols? Surely Solomon must have prided himself on his cosmopolitan spirit and credited himself with being open-minded and tolerant. More than likely he cloaked his apostasy in the language of compromise, calling for others to join him in respecting diversity and honoring various faith traditions. But for all Solomon’s

urbane and enlightened reasoning, he was strictly a case of lust conquering love and hedonism despising holiness. And in the end it was the Lord God who issued Solomon his bottom line, “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”(11:11-12).

One Greater Than Solomon

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasted Solomon in all his glory with the beauty of wild flowers. “See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.” Jesus claimed that the natural, God-created beauty of the flowers was far superior to the man-made, artificial glory of Solomon. The sum of all of Solomon’s success and striving, his acquisitions and achievements, did not add up to the wild, carefree beauty of a field of flowers. The more Solomon sought to build his own empire, the more he forgot that he was called to be a servant in God’s Kingdom. In contrast to Israel’s wealthiest and most powerful king, Jesus calls us to follow him. His message is clear, “Don’t be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God’s *giving*” (The Message, Mt 6:28-31, p.21).

We can either follow the example of Solomon or we can follow the example of the One greater than Solomon. Solomon illustrates how to build a kingdom through ego gratification, excessive accumulation, self-indulgence and the exploitation of others. But Jesus empowers us to seek first God’s kingdom by inviting us into a relationship with himself. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

We have a great deal to learn from Solomon because we are tempted by the same excesses, indulgences, and eccentricities. We too are driven by vain glory and power images. Like Solomon, our growth and success is often artificial and contrived, based on taking advantage of other people and lusting after power and control. There is a marked difference between promoting Solomonic triumphalism and being led by God in Christ’s triumphal procession (2 Cor 2:14). If we desire to stay in the story it is crucial that we discern that difference and follow Jesus.

