

SOLOMON
THE WISEST AND
MOST FOOLISH MAN

Text: 1 Kings 3:3—11:43

In 1961, in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, I heard a psychologist talk about “escape mechanisms.” All of us use these techniques to some extent to shield ourselves momentarily from over-anxiety. The speaker listed such mechanisms as rationalization, repression, suppression, over-reacting in the opposite direction, denial, and so on. One in particular seems to describe the thinking of Solomon. The psychologist called this method of escape “Logic Type Compartmentation.” He said that sometimes people behave as if they had two compartments in their minds, each with its own set of values, possibly in direct conflict with one another. For some, he said, this is necessary because they want to live by two different mindsets. As an illustration, he pointed to the man who says that he believes in democracy and equal rights, but also believes in segregation. Another example is the kind of person who believes that religion and business should not mix. He is honest and sincere (as far as he is concerned) in his religious convictions on Sunday, but he is unscrupulous in his business dealings during the week. An important fact to remember, the psychologist said, is that such a person is unaware of the inconsistencies in his actions and attitudes. Evidently, Solomon had a

similar problem.

Solomon can be viewed as both the wisest and the most foolish man in the Bible. It almost seems as if there *were* two separate and distinct compartments in Solomon’s mind: One was very wise and was reserved for giving advice to his subjects; the other was extremely foolish and was used in making personal decisions.

Solomon’s life is essentially one of *contrasts*. He had a glorious beginning. His parents, David and Bathsheba, who had lost a previous son because of sin, acclaimed his birth with great thanksgiving. David named him “Solomon,” or “the peaceful,” expressing a desire for a peaceful reign for him. God gave him an even loftier name, “Jedidiah,” which literally means “the divine darling.” He was literally “born to the people” and ascended to the throne at the death of his father when he was less than eighteen years of age. He was one of the purest and most promising youths that the mind can imagine. However, when we look ahead only forty years, we see him—still less than sixty years of age—dissipated in body and troubled by an empire about to fall. Lessons for us can be found in Solomon’s life.

THE WISEST MAN

As we go through the early chapters of

1 Kings, we find several evidences of Solomon's wisdom:

First, Solomon was wise in his early choices. One of his earliest acts as king was to visit the high place of Gibeon, where the tabernacle still stood. There he offered one thousand burnt offerings upon the altar of Moses. While he was there God appeared to him in a dream at night. He said, "Ask what you wish me to give you" (1 Kings 3:5).

If you were given such a choice, what would you choose? A long life? Riches? Honor? Solomon chose *wisdom*:

Then Solomon said, "... 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?" (1 Kings 3:6-9).

Listen, young people: Your goals and aims will largely determine what you are and what you become in this life. Try to obtain what is truly important—Christian character, honesty, and a good name—rather than material possessions. Because Solomon chose the blessing of wisdom, he received many other blessings as well:

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" (1 Kings 3:10-14).

Many years ago, when Princess Victoria became Queen of England, Lord Melbourne opened the Bible and read to the young queen the story of Solomon's decision. Wouldn't it be wonderful

if every public official would have a dream like Solomon's and make such a decision!

Second, Solomon was wise in his dealings with others. Uninspired tradition has handed down several illustrations of his wisdom. One story has it that when the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon, she brought him two bouquets of flowers. One was real; the other was an artificial bouquet she had commissioned a craftsman to make for the occasion. It was so lifelike that it was impossible to tell the artificial flowers from the real ones. As a test of Solomon's renowned wisdom, she challenged him to choose the real flowers. After puzzling over the matter for a moment, the king noticed a swarm of bees outside the palace window. "Open the window," he commanded a servant. The bees came in and flew unerringly to the live flowers, demonstrating Solomon's ingenuity. According to the tale, the Queen of Sheba was greatly impressed by Solomon's wisdom (note 1 Kings 10:7).

The Scriptures give us just one illustration of Solomon's wisdom, an incident which occurred shortly after the dream:

Then two women who were harlots came to the king and stood before him. And the one woman said, "Oh, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. And it happened on the third day after I gave birth, that this woman also gave birth to a child, and we were together. There was no stranger with us in the house, only the two of us in the house. And this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on it. So she arose in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your maidservant slept, and laid him in her bosom, and laid her dead son in my bosom. And when I rose in the morning to nurse my son, behold, he was dead; but when I looked at him carefully in the morning, behold, he was not my son, whom I had borne." Then the other woman said, "No! For the living one is my son, and the dead one is your son." But the first woman said, "No! For the dead one is your son, and the living one is my son." Thus they spoke before the king (1 Kings 3:16-22).

A judge today would probably throw out the case for lack of evidence, but Solomon's insightful response is amazing:

And the king said, "Get me a sword." So they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, "Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other." Then the woman whose child was the living one spoke

to the king, for she was deeply stirred over her son and said, "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him." But the other said, "He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him!" Then the king answered and said, "Give the first woman the living child, and by no means kill him. She is his mother" (1 Kings 3:24–27).

As a result of this decision, we read, "When all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had handed down, they feared the king; for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to administer justice" (1 Kings 3:28).

Third, Solomon was wise in his education of others. He was the father of what we call "wisdom literature." We are told,

Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. And Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men, . . . and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations (1 Kings 4:29–31).

The Scriptures tell us that Solomon "also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005" (1 Kings 4:32). Of three thousand proverbs, only about one-third have been preserved, but most of us have heard the following quoted or reflected in common expressions:

Train up a child in the way he should go, [and] when he is old he will not depart from it (Proverbs 22:6).

Spare the rod and spoil the child (suggested by Proverbs 23:13).

A good name is to be more desired than great riches, favor is better than silver and gold (Proverbs 22:1)

A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, . . . (Proverbs 14:17).

Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise (Proverbs 6:6).

A man of many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24).

Solomon's 1,005 songs are not as well known, but one sample is Psalm 127. Note verses 1 and 2:

. . . Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is

vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.

In all, Solomon wrote three books in the Old Testament: In addition to his psalms, he wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. He also wrote on forestry and animal husbandry (1 Kings 4:33, 34).

Fourth, he was wise in his glorification of God. Solomon will always be known for building the great temple in which God's name was to be preserved. It had been the dream of his father, David; but he had not been allowed to build God's temple because he had been a man of blood. Thus the task fell to Solomon. It was a tremendous effort. Thirty thousand Israelites were used, and 150,000 Canaanites were pressed into service. Untold amounts of precious metals and stones went into the project. Perhaps the most unique characteristic of the building project is seen in 1 Kings 6:7: "And the house, while it was being built, was built of stone prepared at the quarry, and there was neither hammer nor axe nor any iron tool heard in the house while it was being built."

Finally, after seven years, the temple was ready. The dedication is recorded in 1 Kings 9 and 1 Chronicles 5. Solomon made a speech to the people on this occasion, *and the glory of God filled the temple*. Here was the climax of Solomon's career. At this pinnacle, however, we also see an indication of that which was to come. God again appeared to Solomon and said,

I have heard your prayer and your supplication, which you have made before Me; I have consecrated this house which you have built by putting My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually. And as for you, if you will walk before Me as your father David walked, in integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you and will keep My statutes and My ordinances, then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, . . . But if you or your sons shall indeed turn away from following Me, and shall not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you and shall go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them, and the house which I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight. So Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins; everyone who passes by will be aston-

ished and hiss and say, "Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?" And they will say, "Because they forsook the Lord their God, who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and adopted other gods and worshiped them and served them, therefore the Lord has brought all this adversity on them" (1 Kings 9:3–9).

God was telling Solomon and the people of Israel, in effect, "If you turn away, the fall will be as great and spectacular as the rise!"

In short, *Solomon was wise in those matters where he obeyed God*. As a result, his glory spread. His kingdom was such that when the Queen of Sheba visited, she said, ". . . I did not believe the reports, until I came and my eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. You exceeded in wisdom and prosperity the report which I heard" (1 Kings 10:7).

Alexander Whyte wrote,

If ever any young saint sought first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and had all these things added unto him, it was Solomon If ever there was anyone of whom it could be said that he had attained and was already perfect, it was Solomon. . . . If ever a blazing lighthouse was set up in the sea of life to warn every man and to teach every man, it was Solomon. . . . If ever it was said over any child's birth, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound," it was surely over the birth and birthrights and graces of Solomon.

THE MOST FOOLISH MAN

After this glorious beginning, one would be tempted to pass over the closing years of Solomon's career in silence. In fact, 1 and 2 Chronicles do just that, but God has a lesson for us here. If the early life of Solomon is an illustration of Matthew 6:33 — ". . . seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you"—then his later life is an illustration of 1 Corinthians 10:12: ". . . let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." In contrast to Solomon's great wisdom, we must also note his foolishness.

First, Solomon was foolish in selfishness. He put himself above God. He spent thirteen years building his palace. If the investment of our time is an indicator of our priorities, what can be said of Solomon, who spent seven years constructing a magnificent temple for God but nearly twice that amount of time building a glorious palace

for himself? Perhaps this little proverb—not one of Solomon's—says it best: "A man wrapped up in himself makes a pretty small package."

Second, he was foolish in compromise. Next to the temple, Solomon erected heathen altars! Under this "wise" king, the idolatry which his father had been so zealous to suppress was established alongside the dwelling place of God! I have been told that "compromise is the secret of success." However, some compromises made by the worldly wise are the epitome of foolishness. Consider "Christian" businessmen who do not drink alcohol themselves but nevertheless host and attend cocktail parties. Some even send gifts of liquor to their customers or employees.

Third, Solomon was foolish in marriage. He had 300 wives and 700 concubines. These wives turned his heart away from God:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign 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." . . . 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 (1 Kings 11:1–8).

How did the builder of God's temple ever get into such a situation? He did whatever was politically expedient. He pledged himself to the daughters of Pharaoh and then to Egypt, making alliances with the most wealthy and most powerful people around him. He was neither the first nor the last to believe that "the end justifies the means." We have been warned not to be "bound together with unbelievers." The apostle Paul asked, "For what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14). It is unwise to be bound together ("unequally yoked," KJV) in many areas—in friendships, in business associations, but especially in marriage. The

young Christian who dates and marries a non-Christian often finds himself or herself caught in the tragedy of a divided marriage. Living a faithful Christian life can be hard enough when one has the loving support of a mate who shares that goal. To try to reach heaven—and guide one's children in that direction—against the wishes of a spouse can be extremely difficult and unpleasant.

Fourth, Solomon was foolish in seeking pleasure and possessions. He literally sought happiness in wine, women, and song; but he could not find it. Eventually, he became disillusioned. He came to realize that great possessions and the search for happiness are vanity. "All is vanity," he declared in Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Seemingly, Solomon "had it all." What dangers are here! Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25). Too many good things ruin too many people. After gaining so many possessions, so much wealth that even rumors did not do it justice, what did Solomon leave behind when he died? *All of it.* No real security can be found in wealth. While Solomon amassed all of this, five years later the king of Egypt came and looted all of it.

Basically, Solomon was foolish in disobeying God. His disobedience hurt him and his country. Someone has said that Solomon "died worn out by excessive self-indulgence, leaving behind him an impoverished treasury, a discontented people, and a tottering empire." Exactly what God had warned Solomon about had indeed come to pass. God allowed the kingdom to be taken away from his son (1 Kings 11:9–13). The kingdom suffered division and then captivity. The people of Israel discovered, as the apostle Paul learned before his conversion, that it is "hard to kick

against the goads" of the Lord's instruction (Acts 26:14).

CONCLUSION

Which was Solomon the most? The wise man or the fool? Saved or lost? A battle was waging within his head. An Italian artist painted a picture of Solomon in the day of resurrection. In that depiction, Solomon is looking doubtfully upon two processions of souls, some on the way to life eternal, others on their way to darkness and condemnation. He is not sure to which group he belongs. This sums up the doubt in people's minds.

Personally, I have always believed that the Book of Ecclesiastes is proof that Solomon repented. Still, what a tragedy that he misspent so much power! Even if he repented and his soul was saved, the damage was done. Israel was on the way to ruin. No wonder Solomon gave us the admonition "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, . . ." (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

Show your wisdom by giving God your life now. Turn to Him who is "greater than Solomon" (Luke 11:31). Continue in faithful service to Him, and you will prove yourself wiser than Solomon. ■

*Lesson To Be Learned:
Look to God for guidance
in making every decision.*

Pressures of Life

"Pressure produces! As we face the pressures and problems of life, let us seek not a passive patience, but rather a positive, enthusiastic cooperation with God's purpose for our lives."

George Sweeting

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