

Once upon a time there were two kings.¹

The first king was renowned for his great wisdom. When he had become king, he had a dream that God appeared to him and offered him anything he wanted. He asked for wisdom, for deep understanding, the ability to discern between what is right and what is wrong.² And God granted that request.

The quintessential story of his wisdom comes right afterwards. Two women come before him for judgment. Each had a baby, though one of the infants had died. Both women were now claiming the living baby as her own son. The king ordered that the baby be split in two with a sword and that half of the baby be given to each woman. In response one woman said, "If I can't have him, neither will you. Cut the child in half." But the other said, "Please, Your Majesty, give her the living child; please don't kill him."³ And the king ordered that the child be given to the one who wanted the baby to live regardless of who got him—for she was obviously the child's true mother. And the people marveled at the king's wisdom.

This first king produced voluminous writings: 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs.⁴ His proverbs probably make up about 1/3 of the Biblical book of Proverbs. And such was his reputation for wisdom, that later generations would attribute later proverbs and other wise writings to him. He was probably not the author of the Song of Songs, or Ecclesiastes, or the Book of Wisdom which are all attributed to him. But his reputation as Israel's paramount, quintessential sage meant that later generations would still look to him as the paragon of wisdom and credit him with writing even more than he did.

Nobles and rulers from his entire region would make their way to Jerusalem to meet him, and to hear his wisdom and ask his opinions. They would give their treasures to him, offering lavish gifts of gold, silver, ivory, and many other precious items. And he amassed tremendous wealth. And during his reign, he used some of these precious materials to build a great temple to his God, the God of Israel, and dedicate it for God's glory. And his reign was looked upon as a great Golden Age in the history of his people.

Truly this first king was a great king, with a seemingly fairy-tale reign.

But there was a second king. This king was ruthless and displayed a lack of good judgment. He began his reign by killing his older brother. And then in scenes that would make any modern gangster proud, he took revenge on all of his late father's enemies and had them killed. One of them had fled to a sacred place of sanctuary for protection, but the king had him killed anyway.⁵ If there was a Godfather, Part 0, this second king could have been the basis for the script.

¹ with thanks for inspiration to Debie Thomas, "A King's Tale"

² 1Kings 3:9, 12

³ 1Kings 3:26

⁴ 1Kings 4:32

⁵ 1Kings 2:30-31

This second king had tremendous appetites. His dining room in his palace would go through 30 cattle and 100 sheep per day.⁶ In a culture where average folks might only eat meat a few times a year, this kind of consumption of meat was extremely extravagant. This king had an enormous harem that included 700 wives who were foreign princesses plus 300 concubines.⁷ He drafted 180,000 of his citizens as forced labor to work on his building projects.⁸

One of those building projects was a new royal palace, even though his father before him had constructed a pretty nice palace. Apparently that lavish palace wasn't quite opulent enough for this second king.

Plus this second king had a number of other building projects constructing pagan temples. Though he was a Jewish king, he built temples for numerous other deities. And some of those temples were for Molech, whose worship involved burning up children. And this purportedly Jewish king not only built these temples—he also worshipped in them.

If the first king had a seemingly fairy tale reign, this second king had a very dark and sinister reign indeed.

The first king was named Solomon.

And the second king was named... Solomon.

Solomon's reign was both glorious and awful, wonderful and hideous. Which makes him one of the most complex personages in scripture to deal with.

Was he the wise sage or a fool who made horrible choices? Yes.

Did he love God or did he turn away from God? Yes.

Was he a great leader or a vicious tyrant? Yes.

As a kid, I thought Solomon was a biblical hero. That's the way the sanitized child-friendly version of him was portrayed in my Sunday school classes and my picture Bibles.

Thus I was shocked in my twenties when I actually read through all of 1Kings for the first time. Solomon had many positive attributes. But he also did terrible things and his reign ended horribly.

In fact, because of this desire to see Solomon as a hero, for generations, Old Testament scholars and preachers have tended to graph Solomon's reign in a sort of "Thelma & Louise" way. Solomon's reign goes charging along at a high level from chapters 2 through 10 of 1Kings, and then in chapter 11 it goes screaming off the side of the cliff and plummets to fiery destruction below.

This is one way to deal with the dual nature of Solomon's reign.

⁶ 1Kings 4:23

⁷ 1Kings 11:3

⁸ 1Kings 5:13-15

But if you take a closer look at chapters 2 through 10, there is plenty of foreshadowing, there are many early warnings mixed in with the glorious portrayal of Solomon. In the midst of his accomplishments, there are many red flags about Solomon if you read carefully.

What it all boils down to is this. The better graph is not running along at a consistently high level and then screaming off the cliff.

Instead it's more like this. Once Solomon pretty ruthlessly consolidates his power, he gets off to a good start. But there are lots of dips, lots of warnings, lots of lows mixed in with the highs before things go screaming off the cliff in chapter 11.

Case in point. Last week in chapter 3 of 1Kings, we heard,
"Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places."⁹

Those high places, by the way, are places where pagan gods were worshipped. So even in the beginning of his reign, Solomon is not 100% faithful to God. And it will get far worse later on.

And today, in our Old Testament lesson from chapter 8, we heard a portion of Solomon's prayer to God as he dedicates the new temple in God's honor. Only, if you look at that prayer closely, 5 times Solomon talks about how *he* is the one who built the temple. So at one level Solomon's prayer is about God, God, God. But it's also about me, me, me, me, me.

And there's one more huge piece that's easy to miss if you just read through 1Kings in isolation. And it is this. The final editors of 1Kings probably were part of the same school of thought as the final editors of the book of Deuteronomy. And in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives rules and warnings about how a king is supposed to behave. How does Solomon stack up to these rules for kings?

Well, in Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people, "You may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose... Even so, (the king) must not acquire many horses for himself."¹⁰

1Kings tells us Solomon had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses.¹¹

Moses tells the people, "(The King) must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away."¹²

Solomon had 700 foreign wives, and 300 concubines. And his heart did turn away.¹³

⁹ 1Kings 3:3

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 17:15-16

¹¹ 1Kings 10:26

¹² Deuteronomy 17:17

¹³ 1Kings 11:3

Moses tells the people, "Also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself."¹⁴

Solomon amassed a ridiculously huge amount of silver and gold,¹⁵ and in fact had so much gold that he would only drink out of cups made of pure gold.¹⁶

Moses concludes that the king must keep near him a copy of God's law, "and he shall read in it all the days of his life... diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment."

Solomon had his own wisdom, and his own voluminous writings. There is no evidence that he felt the need to diligently study God's law. And it is patently clear that he did exalt himself above other Israelites, and that he did turn away from following God in a spectacular spiritual flameout.

If the rules for kings in Deuteronomy were a report card, Solomon would get an F. He completely fails to follow the rules for kings.

Other kings, like Solomon's father David stuck with God, in spite of having some ups and downs, throughout their reigns.

Some kings never had much of a relationship with God. They started badly and ended badly.

But no other king had the spectacular fall that Solomon had, starting highly, and yet ending up by turning his back on God.

And thus, Solomon is a warning for us.

We live in one of the most powerful and affluent cultures in the history of the world. And as a culture, we are turning away from God in record numbers.

Like western Europe before us, Christianity in America has been declining precipitously over the past couple of decades. The 21st century has seen the most rapid shrinkage of Christianity in the history of the United States.

Wealth. Pleasure. Comfort. Trusting in our own intelligence, our own abilities. These things all tripped up Solomon. And they are dangers for us.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 17:17

¹⁵ 1Kings 10:14

¹⁶ 1Kings 10:21

In poorer areas of the world, Christianity is growing by leaps and bounds. In America it's shrinking precipitously. A few congregations are growing. But overall, every Christian group in America is shrinking. The only exception in America is amongst recent non-white immigrants. Congregations made up of large percentages of recent immigrants are still growing in America.

But once you factor out those immigrants, Christianity is shrinking overall amongst all groups in America. Doesn't matter if we're talking Episcopalian, or Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic, or Southern Baptist. We're all shrinking. Christianity in America today is shrinking at the most rapid rate in the history of our country. And the most rapidly growing group in America is the unaffiliated, those with no religion.

Wealth. Pleasure. Comfort. Trusting in our own intelligence, our own abilities. These things all tripped up Solomon. And they are huge dangers for us in 21st century America.

But there is good news. And you are it. Christianity may be shrinking rapidly. But there are still active Christians in America. After all, you are here this morning.

You are here this morning. And that is an awesome thing.

Your presence here in the morning hours of this first day of the new week is a sign of your wanting to follow God. You are here to offer praise and worship in thanksgiving for the blessings in your life. You are here to come to God's table to be fed and to be strengthened to meet the challenges of the week to come.

Yes there are many spiritual dangers in our culture. There are many things in culture that can choke out our relationship with God.

But you are here today. Thank God for that. You are here today.