



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 19
SOLOMON**

MAY 7-12, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Ecclesiastes 7-12; Psalm 91	1 Kings 3:5-28, Psalm 91
Tuesday	Song of Songs 1-8, Psalm 92	1 Kings 8:1-21, Psalm 92
Wednesday	1 Kings 13-16, Psalm 93	1 Kings 11:1-13, Psalm 93
Thursday	1 Kings 17-19, Psalm 94	Song of Songs 2:7-13, Psalm 94
Friday	1 Kings 20-22, Psalm 95	Ecc 1:12-28; 3:12-22, Psalm 95

READ

1 Kings 3:5-28

Psalms 91

REFLECT

Solomon was the great son of the great king David. The two reigns, however were very different, as were the two men. David's story is one of great daring, with success often snatched from the jaws of defeat. Solomon's is one of strength, security, stability, and astonishing prosperity. Like his father David, he left writings that became a part of the Old Testament, but writings very different from his father's psalms. This week we will look at three great moments in the reign of Solomon, and two of the biblical books that he is traditionally believed to have authored.

Today's passage describes a moment at the start of Solomon's reign, when the Lord offers to grant Solomon whatever gift he wishes. Solomon's response is to ask for "a hearing heart to judge Thy people and to discern between good and evil." We often say in summary fashion that Solomon asked for "wisdom," but we note that it was more specific than that: a certain kind of wisdom very appropriate to a king. (Solomon had already shown wisdom, if only in his wise choice of the gift of wisdom; and David, his father, already knew him to be a wise man: 1 Kings 2:6, 9.) Nevertheless we are to understand this as a special gifting from God, perhaps an enhancement of natural perceptions, but strengthened and extended by his openness to God in knowledge and obedience. He understood that it was the knowledge of God that in turn allowed him to see into the hearts of men and women (see Proverbs 1:7 and 9:13).

The passage goes on to use an example of Solomon's wisdom, one that became very well known in his own day and did much for his

reputation. Two prostitutes, living in one house, had each recently borne a baby boy. One night one of the babies died, and the next morning each woman claimed the living child as her own. Because of the circumstances – as prostitutes they had no husbands or family to back them up, nor could one of them be expected to speak with more integrity than the other – the "she said, she said" nature of the case (1 Kings 3:22-23) made it virtually insoluble. But Solomon found a way to bring out the truth.

The case of the two prostitutes is distasteful, but today's culture is such that something similar might well appear on the news. If so, perhaps the reaction of many of us would be that folk like these deserve all the bad luck they get; their case would have a morbid interest, but I (for one) might be less avid about whether real justice was ever done. Not so with Solomon. He looked beyond the disagreeable aspects of the problem, and in doing so he found the way forward. The humanity inherent in the case, the palpable love of a mother for her child, gave Solomon the key to unlock the puzzle. But it was also clearly, for him, the reason justice needed to be done.

RESPOND

The New Testament affirms our need for wisdom in this world, but adds a powerful new dimension: it is Jesus Christ Himself who "has become our wisdom from God" (1 Cor 1:30). Surely through His eyes we are better able to see beyond the off-putting aspects of the troubles of others, and glimpse how it is God would wish us to pray for others, and to be active on their behalf.

PRAY

Lord, Thank You that we have come to know Your wisdom in Your bottomless love for us. Help us also learn the wisdom of loving – of loving both ourselves and others.

- D.D.

READ

1 Kings 8:1-21

Psalm 92

REFLECT

As with David, so Solomon too had to give effort at the beginning of his reign to consolidating his power. Enemies are eliminated – not cruelly, as the text is careful to show, but as a result of their own unrighteousness – and a building program commences. Solomon builds two palaces, one for himself and one for his wife, the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kings 3:1; 9:24), as well as the new Temple of God – and many other improvements are made to the city (the “Millo” of 9:24 was apparently a system of terracing that needed frequent repair). National security is addressed by the expansion of the army, especially with war chariots, and the construction of a fleet. Further, international alliances are strengthened and extended, even to the point of Solomon’s “rule” over neighboring lands (4:21). It is characteristic that whereas we heard of the “mighty men” of David, with Solomon we get a list of administrators (4:1-19).

Our passage today represents the peak of Solomon’s initial consolidating work, and actually the spiritual high point of his reign (because sadly things will then go downhill fast). With the Temple of the Lord completed, Solomon dedicates the new house of God in a lengthy sermon/prayer that takes up most of chapter 8. It can be divided into four sections: 1. Solomon’s proclamation that this day means the fulfillment of God’s promise to David of a Temple (8:12-21); 2. his prayer to the Lord for the fulfillment of the other promise to David of an eternal throne (8:22-26); 3. his very detailed prayer that the Lord’s mercies now be available through the Temple each day to each Israelite (8:27-53); and 4. his exhortation to the people that such mercy on the Lord’s part requires their full and complete devotion and obedience (8:54-61).

The first verses of chapter 8 relate the very stately and very exciting progress of the Ark of the Covenant from its accustomed place in “the city of David” to the new Temple on the hill above the town. (The modern city of Jerusalem encompasses both these areas and much more.) The Ark, containing the tables of the commandments and other remembrances of the Exodus, is a visible reminder of the historic promise of God to deliver His people into a secure land. But it is also the representation of the very presence of the Living God, and so the procession is accompanied by unprecedented series of sacrifices. Thus God is “brought” to the Temple, and yet the text is clear that this is no God to be fetched here and there. For *after* the Ark is in place, *then* a cloud of glory fills the Temple, so sovereign and powerful that for a while no one can go about their business. Even in a “house” built at His command, this God remains in perfect freedom to be where He wishes when He wishes. (See also Stephen’s sermon on this point in Acts 7:47-50.) Solomon’s power is great, his efforts are astounding, his wisdom and loquacity are vast. But nevertheless this one glimpse of the glory of God dwarfs anything else in the story of Solomon’s reign. It is not Solomon, but the Lord, who is worthy of *worship*.

RESPOND

It is easy to underrate the value of worship in Christian spirituality. Often our focus on a Sunday morning is “getting fed,” that is, being blessed again by the mercy of God and the love of the body. But today’s psalm (“a song for the Sabbath day”) reminds that our deepest need, and deepest joy, on Sunday, is “to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing praises to Thy name, O Most High.”

PRAY

Come, now is the time to worship;

come, now is the time to give your heart.

Come, just as you are, to worship;

come, just as you are, before your God; come.

- D.D.

READ

1 Kings 11:1-13

Psalms 93

REFLECT

Sadly, the fine start Solomon made as king was not sustained. Already very early in his reign we hear the suggestion of flaws: his marriage to a non-Israelite, his completion of his own house before the Lord's Temple, and especially his habit of sacrificing "on the high places" (1 Kings 3:1-2). Each of these is a problem because it implies that Solomon's priorities were not solid. There was a concern that marriage to women of other nations would prompt a temptation to worship their gods. And indeed in his later years Solomon gave "love" to these other gods (11:1-5). Similarly, the "high places," or sites of ancient sanctuaries, tended to mix the worship of the Lord together with a veneration of local deities. The building of the Temple was in fact designed to eliminate such unauthorized venues for idolatry, but Solomon continued to frequent these other sites. So also his attention to his own palace (and probably his wife's) before building the Lord's Temple hints at a preoccupation with his own creature comforts.

So, after the account of the dedication of the Temple, instead of the tale of a powerful and righteous reign we find instead a series of odd and unsatisfying stories that lead finally to the outright condemnation of Solomon as a king "who did evil in the sight of the Lord" (11:6). Relations with Hiram, supplier of cedar (9:12), and with Pharaoh, his father-in-law (11:14, 18), sour noticeably – possibly because Solomon has gotten too comfortable to care much. We are treated to a lengthy catalog of an enormous accumulation of wealth (10:14-25); one commentator has written that we need to remember Solomon as "the king that went after the gold." Even parts of the Temple, paneled first with cedar, were then covered with gold plate – surely a case of gilding

the lily. The undercurrent of disapproval of all of this excess is echoed by Jesus, who said that He was far more impressed by the [ungilded!] lily than by "Solomon in all his glory" (Matthew 6:28-29). Worst of all, perhaps, to our modern sensibilities, is his enslavement of so many people for the achievement of his ends (5:13-14). Even the visit of the Queen of Sheba, who comes to test Solomon's wisdom and leaves fully convinced, sounds more like Hollywood than Jerusalem. Solomon's wisdom in that conversation, it has been noted, instead of being used for the benefit of the Lord's people, makes an appearance instead as the starring turn of a celebrity talk show.

But it is Solomon's turning of his heart from the Lord, the God of Israel, that underlies these other errors. And it is this specific sin that brings judgment upon him and the nation. In today's passage, the Lord speaks one last time to Solomon, prophesying failure of the kingdom to hold together after his death. Solomon's son Rehoboam will retain only the single tribe of Judah; Jeroboam the upstart will lead the other tribes into the "Northern Kingdom," splitting the people of God permanently. Thus does the Lord of the covenant dispense His just punishment, while maintaining full faithfulness to His promises to David.

RESPOND

As Christians we have come to know God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ; we are grateful that our mistakes do not need to dominate our fates as Solomon's did his. Still, the consequences of sin are never fully predictable. How much better to build a life around the conscientious pursuit of God's best, rather than seeing how consistently we can careen on the far perimeter of His love.

PRAY

Lord, Keep our love for You fresh, and our obedience strong. Thank You for the ways You find to come to us with your word and Your Spirit, freeing us to follow You.

- D.D.

READ

Song of Solomon 2:7-13

Psalms 94

REFLECT

Solomon is credited for the existence of three books of the Bible. The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings, which Solomon may have stimulated by his own interests, and which was enlarged by subsequent editors (see Prov 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; 30:1; etc.). Billy Graham has said that he reads from both the Psalms and the Proverbs daily, the Psalms feeding his heart relationship with the Lord, and the Proverbs addressing wise dealing with other humans. The third book, Ecclesiastes, we will look at tomorrow.

The second book, the Song of Solomon, is very different from these. Like Ecclesiastes it is focused on human realities “under the sun” (God’s name appears just once), but rather than wisdom, the topic is the sensual and passionate love between a woman and a man. If Solomon himself is behind this book, then it reflects his own recorded passion for women, though the focus in this book on the bond between just one woman and one man is much easier for us to apply to our circumstances than the example of Solomon’s multiple marriages.

What is such a book doing in the Bible? Different communities have given different answers. The rabbis acknowledged its frank sexual content, and accepted the book as part of an education in all the ways of God’s good world – though they discouraged young people from reading it, and forbade public citations: “he who sings it in the banquet-halls loses his share in the life to come!” For Christians, who cherish the intimacy of the love of the Father and the Son, a new approach was possible: the Song is most often read in our traditions as a metaphor of God’s love for the Church, and for individual believers within it. This reading is enhanced by the fact that the love of the two in the Song remains in the realm of “memory, anticipation, and desire” (to cite one

author), rather than of clear consummation, and can easily be idealized as spiritual love. In fact, much of the book seems to express the courtship phase of the relationship, with the bridegroom awaiting his lover’s appropriate emergence into sexual awareness: “Do not arouse or awaken my love, until she pleases” (8:4)

Today’s passage is a fine example of the richness of the poetry of this book, as well as the theme of arousal to full love. The lovers are separated by the fragile but very real conventions of society – the lattice, the window, the wall – but the invitation is ardently extended for a love made for the springtime, and a springtime made for love. (I have the Beach Boys lyrics in my head: “Wouldn’t it be nice to live together in the kind of world where we belong?”) Clearly this book blesses the best of human passion, despite all the examples in the Bible of willful and misguided sexuality. (In our own wedding ceremony, as Ruth appeared at the foot of the aisle awaiting the wedding march, I called out these lines to her [10b-14].)

But as a text in the larger canon of Scripture, it just as clearly calls us to passion in our love for God. Adam and Eve were together created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-28). Each man and each woman therefore has a powerful capacity to come alive to the transcendent wooing of the Lord of love.

RESPOND

Love is a tricky thing, whether focused on the human or the divine. Today’s Psalm speaks out of a situation that seemed almost completely loveless. Still, we should be encouraged to know that love can be cultivated and strengthened, and that God is behind our efforts to grow in love our love for each other, and to grow in our love for Him.

PRAY

Lord, Thank you for Your seasons and Your growth; for youth and its passions; for age and its wisdoms; and for your love for us in all circumstances (SS 7:10).

- D.D.

READ

Ecclesiastes 1:12-28 and 3:12-22

Psalm 95

REFLECT

The book of Ecclesiastes is said to be written by “the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” (Eccl 1:1) It presents itself as a diligent search for the meaning of life in the face of the overriding impression that life is “vanity,” that is, empty and without meaning. This is also the search for wisdom (1:17). But the mood from the beginning is extremely doubtful about the outcome. There is much observation about life and nature (it is here that we find the inspiration for Pete Seeger’s “Turn, Turn, Turn” – 3:1-8). But words of hope and faith are few and far between.

Again, as with the Song of Solomon, we may well ask, “What is this book doing in the Bible?” I had a teacher once who said that you could summarize the contents of Scripture as being “the truth about God” except for Ecclesiastes; so he had emended it to “the truth about God and humanity.”) I’m no longer sure that is true; I find much specifically theological truth in Ecclesiastes.

Some teachers see here a deep skepticism about life itself that forms a sort of black hole in the biblical writings. In this case, “vanity” (the Hebrew *hebel*) is understood to refer to the permanent pointlessness of human existence. Other teachers see a breath of hope if “vanity” is rather the pointlessness of *sinful* human existence; passages such as 3:12-22, assigned for today’s reading, are seen to affirm that only in God is meaning found, but that meaning definitely *is* found in God.

I find that the place of Ecclesiastes in the Bible seems anchored by two things. First, the whole book seems to be a very fine commentary on Genesis 3:17-19, the specific nature of the curse that God brings upon humanity after the fall into sin. Second, it is surprising how much of the language of Ecclesiastes and its hard look at life is reflected in the

particular phrases of Jesus’ teaching. For instance, Ecclesiastes 1:3 asks, “What advantage does a person have in all his work which he does under the sun?” In the same harsh phraseology, Jesus asks, “What advantage does a person have if he gains the whole world, and loses his soul? (Mark 8:36). Discerning minds need to know.

Three summers ago I chose to study the whole of Ecclesiastes, and I had a great time doing it. I was grateful for the commentary of Derek Kidner, who unflinchingly brought out both the harsh realities and the real comforts of the book. It was a poignant time. My mother had died in April, and during that summer we went back east to a gathering of the Dorman tribe in New York, which included a memorial service for Mom and her burial in the family plot. And I heard the final word on the “vanity” of Ecclesiastes in the cemetery, as I stood at the edge of the open grave and listened to the words of Paul from 1 Corinthians 15: 54-58: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory, O death, where is your sting? ... Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil in the Lord *is never in vain*.” That day, with the evidence of life’s futility lying before me, I once again chose hope, and joy, and the Living One.

RESPOND

Life has a way of convincing us, from time to time, of its own pointlessness. And it has a point. But Jesus promises the transformation of life into His Life. This is a gift for us, and through us to those we love. What deeper wisdom can there be, than to seek the gift of His life?

PRAY

Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our God, our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, the sheep of his hands. Psalm 95:6-7

- Dave Dorman