



A KING CROWNED: A FADED KING

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Christmas letters serve more than one function. They can be documents of self-celebration, thoughtful reflection, or a record of the past year's events. Sometimes, however, they testify to a life's journey. This week we received two Christmas letters from long-time Christian friends which caused me to reflect on both the changing circumstances of life (new grandchildren) and on convictions of heart that stand the test of time (confidence in God's love and faithfulness).

We are in the midst of a study series, *The EPIC* which tells the story of the Bible from beginning to end. This message records the final events of Israel's unified monarchy. Three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon ruled the whole people of God, each for about 40 years. Despite twists and turns, the reign of Saul and the reign of David both ended where they began—with Saul as a pretender and with David as a man of God. Solomon, the subject of this message, is a bit more complex. He began well, but ended in ruin. Unlike the experience of my recent Christmas correspondents, Solomon's faith did not stand the test of time. It faded as he grew older.

There are some important differences between Solomon and his predecessors. First, Solomon was prepared from childhood to be king. Both Saul and David were anointed with no prior warning or preparation. Solomon knew of the extraordinary promises spoken regarding a 'son of David' who was destined to change the world. Solomon was called upon to build the temple in Jerusalem with money and materials that had been gathered before his ascension to the throne. He began his rule with both great wealth and a stable peace. Great possibilities and great responsibilities led the young king to seek God's help in prayer.

1 Kings 3:7-13a:

⁷“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. ⁸Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. ⁹So 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?”

¹⁰The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. ¹¹So 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, ¹²I 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. ¹³Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both riches and honor.”

The Lord is pleased with Solomon's prayer, but he states his approval in negative terms—'you did not ask for selfish outcomes.' Perhaps a deeper request is missing. Solomon asks to be an effective king, not a godly man. He wants to lead the nation, but doesn't ask for his own heart to be ruled by God. Solomon did not face external dangers in his lifetime and was not prepared for the dangers that eventually welled up inside of him. Looking ahead:

1 Kings 11:4:

⁴As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. . . . ⁶So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

Though the conclusion is sorrowful, let's first consider the early years of Solomon's reign when his prayer to rule the people well was answered abundantly.

1 Kings 4:20-21:

²⁰The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. ²¹And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon's subjects all his life.

Solomon ruled over a kingdom of growing wealth and happy subjects. He succeeded without brutality—his people were at peace and his borders were secure.

1 Kings 4:29-34:

²⁹God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. ³⁰Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. . . . ³²He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. ³³He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. ³⁴Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

Don't miss how rare and attractive this description is. The people of God are happy and successful. Their king is wise regarding not just the content of biblical religion, but also in matters of science, government, society, and the deepest human questions.

The most famous story of Solomon recalls his insight into the heart of a mother. Two women claimed to be the mother of the same baby. In an act that seemed cruel at first, Solomon calls for the child to be cut in two. When the rightful mother gives up her claim to save the baby's life, the child is placed in her arms. Because the king understood human emotions and the forces that drive personal decisions, he was an especially effective ruler. In the early years of Solomon's reign the people of Israel received God's blessing and were themselves a source of blessing to the world.

In our day believers are sometimes credited for good works, especially in places of poverty and deprivation. However, more often we are regarded as narrow-minded and hurtful. This is especially true (directly contrasting Solomon) in matters of science, psychology, and the establishment of social harmony. Yet, in countless settings that are never reported on, believing people are giving away the gifts of God just as Solomon did.

In a recent letter, Nolan and Sandra Sharp wrote of their ministry in Croatia. Among other endeavors, the Sharps are helping overcome discouragement among students from a variety of backgrounds by offering classes on 'How to do school.' They are explaining how to stay on task, how to connect ideas, how to take notes on

lectures, and how to keep track of what one has read—in short, they are teaching young people how to study. With school becoming less of a mystery, bright kids are staying in school and gaining hope that had not existed before. The Sharps are serving others and honoring the Lord in a small setting, just as Solomon did on a national scale in his day. Certainly the message of God's saving love is more powerful when communicated by those who have already proved themselves to be wise and servant hearted.

There are, however, a couple of cautions about Solomon's celebrated wisdom that we should take note of. The first is that Solomon could offer wise counsel but he couldn't make anybody else wise. Solomon's wisdom was God's gift, not something for which he deserved credit. God alone knows the deep things of creation and the particulars of every personal situation. A word to the wise helps for the moment, but God's servants must point those who seek life-changing insight to the Lord, not to themselves.

The second caution: divine wisdom is often mysterious or difficult. The Lord deserves our humble adoration whether his will makes sense to us or not. It is possible that Solomon's request for wisdom-with-qualifications ('help me rule successfully') sowed the seeds of his undoing. A lasting connection with God cannot be gained if we seek it on our terms with prior conditions. Solomon was born in royal surroundings and he had clear expectations for how his life should turn out. It is common for believers to approach the Lord most often seeking his blessing for the path we would prefer to travel. But every saint must give up the notion that her or she is in control. The living God is always worthy of worship and very often his ways are not our ways.

Chapters 5-10 of 1 Kings describe many of Solomon's great accomplishments, chiefly the building of the temple in Jerusalem. In addition, the king built grand homes for himself and his Egyptian queen. He fortified military strongholds and strengthened the defenses of Jerusalem. He established a navy and amassed enormous wealth.

As we have seen, Solomon's wisdom and wealth drew the admiration of the monarchs of surrounding nations. Chief among them was the queen of Sheba whose visit to Jerusalem is recorded in 1 Kings 10.

1 Kings 10:3-5:

³Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. ⁴When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, ⁵the food on his table, the seating of his

officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed.

Solomon received wave after wave of admiration and praise and grew to like it very much, especially when his admirers were female.

1 Kings 10:23-25:

²³King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. ²⁴The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. ²⁵Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift—articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules.

In addition to admirers he was constantly sought out by gift-bringers and favor-seekers, and he was finally warped by his successes. Solomon was smarter than every other living person, a man of unique genius. Who could offer him a necessary word of counsel or correction? Who might serve as Solomon's friend or confidant, or even as someone with whom the king could share an interesting conversation?

We might also make note of the use of superlatives in the Solomon stories. There is always a suggestion of measurement (and competition). Solomon is wisest, the richest, the most famous, the most admired. Isolation is inevitable if every person in every setting must be judged as 'less than' the king.

The teaching of the New Testament is clear. Because Jesus is always present with us, no saint is ever the wisest or richest or most admirable person in any setting. Solomon lost track of what had been given to him, he set aside his awareness of God's grandeur, and lost his way. Human applause must be ignored so we can attend to the Lord's voice. Our best hope for seeing ourselves clearly and valuing the contribution of 'the strong and the weak; the rich and the poor' is to worship a God whose glory makes us small.

I was talking to Mike Knowles recently about the ministry of *Young Life in Africa*. He observed that American Christians receive more from friendship with Africans (especially the poor) than Africans receive from Americans. Joy is infectious and courage abundant among believers who know their need and are grateful for all that God gives them. Solomon spoke only to people who were rich and powerful and never had such friendships.

In addition to the warping influences of abundance and competition, Solomon refused to acknowledge the diminutions of age. As we noted earlier, his conclusion was sorrowful.

1 Kings 11:4, 6:

⁴As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. . . . ⁶So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

Solomon multiplied wives in order to outdo all other monarchs and the seductive power of sex and womanly admiration was his undoing. The writings of his younger self (Song of Songs and Proverbs) make clear that he knew the power and possibilities of sexual relationships and could warn readers against foolish choices. Yet in the end his own wisdom was lost to him. He proved the familiar adage that there is no fool like an old fool.

The foolishness of idolatry leads eventually to despair. With this in mind, we conclude with a passage from Ecclesiastes, a difficult book that is traditionally attributed to Solomon. These verses from chapter one describe the world as it appears when the voice of God is silenced.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11:

¹The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

²"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

³What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?

⁴Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

⁵The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.

⁶The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

**⁷All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.**

**To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.**

**⁸All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.**

**The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.**

**⁹What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.**

**¹⁰Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?**

**It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.**

**¹¹There is no remembrance of men of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow.**

Meaningless circles: sunrise and sunset, generations being born, generations dying. No one matters. No one succeeds. No one makes a difference. Solomon once was sought out as a man who could instruct the world and ended up with nothing but emptiness to speak about. May God preserve us from Solomon's path and keep us aware of our inadequacies and dependence on him.