

Wisdom for a Lifetime?

Lessons from the life of Solomon

In 1993 a 55-year-old man came to Christ here at Faith. For the first time in his life John Olson understood grace, that a relationship with God is a gift that you receive by faith, not something you earn. He became a disciple of Jesus. Since a disciple is a student, he started reading through the Old Testament. Every so often he would make an appointment with me to talk about something he'd read. I'll never forget the day he sat down and opened up to a passage and asked, "Pastor Steve, what the [bleep] is this talking about?" That's one of the many things I loved about him was that he was curious about things that he found in Scripture. When he found something confusing or troubling or strange in the Old Testament, he asked questions like, "Why is **this** in the Bible?"

1 Kings 11 is one of those passages. Why is the Bible so transparent about Solomon's failure? As we'll see, earlier passages in 1 Kings tell us that Solomon was the wisest person in the world, and yet he ended up astonishingly foolish. Why is the Bible so transparent about Solomon's failure?

One reason is given in 1 Corinthians 10 (in the New Testament). There Paul said that the disobedience of the children of Israel in the wilderness was recorded as a warning so that we wouldn't follow their example. In a similar way, Solomon's disobedience is written as a warning to those of us who are seeking to become wise. None of us wants to be wise for a season but eventually become foolish. The Scriptures stress over and over the importance of walking with God until our final breath.

We are toward the end of our sermon series on wisdom, *Becoming Wise, a matter of life and death*. In past weeks we've seen examples to imitate in Daniel and Joseph; today we'll see that Solomon is an example to avoid. Week after next we'll wrap up this series by looking at how Jesus embodied wisdom. Today we are going to notice three truths that are illustrated in the life of Solomon (in 1 Kings). These truths will help us stay wise for a lifetime.

First, Solomon's life illustrates that:

Wisdom can be squandered and lost. (1 Kings 3:9-14, 4:29-34, 5:7, 10:1-13)

1 Kings makes clear that God gave Solomon unsurpassed wisdom. He didn't merely appear to be wise; he was legitimately wise. I want us to survey the heights of Solomon's wisdom so that we can see just how far he fell.

1 Kings 3 records that after Solomon became king God spoke to him in a dream. God told Solomon, "Ask what I shall give you." Solomon expressed how inadequate he was to govern such a great nation as Israel; he said, "I am but a little child" (v. 7). Here's the heart of his request (v. 9):

9 Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?"

Solomon uses “wisdom words” found in Proverbs 1 to describe what he really wanted. He wanted understanding so that he could govern well. He wanted discernment so that he’d know the difference between good and evil. The Lord was very pleased with Solomon’s request.

11 And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, 12 behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. 13 I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days.

God promised Solomon the wisdom he wanted, and he threw in riches and honor as a bonus. But notice what God says in verse 14.

14 And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days.”

The presupposition is that wisdom can be squandered and lost. **If** Solomon walked in the ways of God - the ways of wisdom - he would experience God’s blessing. But the converse was also true: if he abandoned the ways of wisdom, he would experience God’s discipline.

Another statement about Solomon’s wisdom is found in 4:29-30.

29 And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, 30 so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.

Solomon’s wisdom was unsurpassed. We read later in chapter 4 that people from many nations came to Solomon to hear and see his wisdom (see 4:34). In chapter 10 we read that when the Queen of Sheba came to hear his wisdom and see how he managed his kingdom, she went away saying that Solomon’s “wisdom and prosperity” surpassed even the report she had heard. And so Solomon had international fame and influence because of his wisdom. [See also 5:7, how the king of Tyre spoke of Solomon’s wisdom.]

Look at the detail that is given in verse 4:32:

32 He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.

Many of those proverbs are recorded in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Many of those songs are recorded in the book known as Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs). Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Solomon had wisdom that was appreciated

internationally in his day and that continues to provide guidance 3,000 years later. That can be said of very few people.

In summary, Solomon may have been the wisest person who ever lived, save Jesus himself. And yet he died a foolish man.

Solomon's life illustrates that ***Our wisdom can be squandered and lost***. Just because you are wise today does not guarantee that you will be wise for the rest of your life. I can remember people I knew in college who were passionate about Jesus and who walked in wisdom who are now lukewarm or who have abandoned the faith altogether.

Solomon's example warns us against pursuing and gaining wisdom for a season, and then becoming careless or complacent. Pride is a great temptation to many who have a degree of wisdom. Almost 300 years ago William Law wrote that "Pride grows on our virtues," not our vices. Pride can grow on our wisdom, discernment, and knowledge. When we surveyed the book of Proverbs we saw that nobody ever "arrives" when it comes to wisdom; wisdom is not a box we ever check off our list ("I'm now wise. . . check."). Rather, we read this in Proverbs 1:

5 Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,

"Let the wise hear." In other words, if you are wise, stay humble and teachable and "hear" what the book of Proverbs is saying. As with Solomon, your current wisdom, your giftedness, your influence, your spiritual resume won't sustain you. You need to ***stay hungry for wisdom*** until your final breath.

Second, Solomon's life warns us to:

Pay attention to "red flags" of foolishness. (1 Kings 3:1, 10:26-27, 12:4, Deuteronomy 17:16-17) Red flags are used as a sign of danger - at the beach when there are dangerous water conditions. Spiritually speaking, there are also red flags. If we understand that wisdom can be squandered and lost, we will be on the lookout for red flags - first and foremost in our own lives, but also in the lives of others with whom we have community.

We find red flags in Solomon's life throughout 1 Kings 3-10, indications that he was on a dangerous path. The first two are found in 1 Kings 3:1.

1 Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt. He took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem.

Becoming the son-in-law of Pharaoh king of Egypt was politically expedient. Such an alliance would have meant that Egypt was committed to defending Israel from her enemies. But throughout the OT, Israel is warned against trusting in Egypt instead of trusting in God.

As well, taking a non-Jewish wife violated the spirit of the Law of Moses which forbid intermarrying with the Canaanites who already lived in the promised Land (see Deuteronomy 7:3-4). The concern was that “they would turn your sons from following [the Lord] to serve other gods.” We’re explicitly told in chapter 11 that that’s exactly what happened with Solomon’s other wives.

In 1 Kings 10:26–27 we read that Solomon acquired 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen. As well, he “made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone.” This is a red flag because Deuteronomy 17:16–17 prohibited this very thing!

16 Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall never return that way again.’ 17 And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.

Even though God had promised to give Solomon “riches and honor” (3:13), his ambition was for more, more, more. This mirrors the experience described in Ecclesiastes 2:10, “And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them.” Solomon lived an incredibly self-indulgent life.

There’s one last red flag I want to mention. If we keep reading 1 Kings we find another concerning issue in Solomon’s life in 12:4, namely that he laid disproportionately heavy burdens on the ten northern tribes of Israel. Their laborers were required to work harder than the two tribes that lived in and around Jerusalem. This unjust treatment sowed the seeds that led the ten northern tribes to break away and form their own kingdom (Israel) after Solomon’s death.

Solomon’s life illustrates that ***We need to pay attention to our “red flags” of foolishness.***

The question for you and me is not ***if*** there be pockets of foolishness in our lives. There will be. The question is whether or not we are prepared spiritually and relationally ***when*** they surface. Spiritually we need to be humble enough to admit when foolishness surfaces in our lives. When was the last time you apologized to another person for something you said or did? When was the last time you apologized to God for something you thought? Spiritually we need to be humble enough to own up to our foolishness, seek out wisdom, and then do differently.

When it comes to being prepared relationally, we need people in our lives who will speak the truth in love, people who will compassionately point out our blind spots. We get the impression that Solomon didn’t have such people. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” Consider giving the green light to a trusted friend, “If you ever see something in my life that concerns you, you have my permission to talk with me about it.” Do you have anybody like that in your life? Do you have anybody who has the freedom to say things like, “You talk too much,” or “You talk about yourself too much” or “That relationship you’re pursuing seems unhealthy to me” or “You seem to be

holding a grudge”? If not, you’re not relationally prepared when red flags of foolishness pop up in your life.

Third, Solomon’s life illustrates that:

Wisdom and foolishness are matters of the heart. (1 Kings 11:1-8)

1 Kings 11:1–8 records where Solomon ended up spiritually. Verses 1-3 tell us this:

1 Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women,

In doing this he ignored a very specific command not to intermarry with the surrounding peoples (see Exodus 34:11-16).

2 from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love.

The issue was not their ethnicity. The issue was that they would turn his heart after their gods. That was the opposite of God’s desire for his people. The Jewish people were to love the Lord their God exclusively (“no other gods before me”); they were to love the Lord their God with ***all their heart*** (Deuteronomy 6).

Using the terminology of wisdom, Solomon no longer feared the Lord because he quit relating to him as he really is, namely One who was worthy of his ***full*** allegiance. When he loved “many foreign women,” he was running headlong into the temptation of worshiping their gods. We’re not merely supposed to avoid sin; we’re supposed to avoid temptation (“lead us not into temptation”). Maybe Solomon thought he could “cling to them in love” without his heart being enticed to worship their gods. But he couldn’t.

What’s tragically fascinating here is that in the book of Proverbs Solomon repeatedly warned his son about being seduced by “the forbidden woman” who had no fear of the Lord (Proverbs 2:16, 5:20, 7:5, 22:14). He warned against taking this path of foolishness that leads to death. And yet that’s exactly the path Solomon himself took.

3 He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.

Solomon became so self-indulgent that in addition to the daughter of Pharaoh, he had a thousand other women. “And his wives turned away his heart” from his love of God. Verse 4 gets more specific:

4 For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.

When Solomon was old he gave up and gave in. The Lord who had given him unsurpassed wisdom became to him only one of many gods to be worshiped. His heart was divided between the Lord and “other gods.”

Here in verse 4 and in verse 6 Solomon is contrasted with his father David. Solomon’s “heart was not wholly true to the Lord. . . as was the heart of David.” David sinned against God in some spectacular ways (adultery and murder). What’s the difference between David and Solomon? My read is that **David knew how to repent**. When his sin was exposed, he humbled himself before God with fasting and prayer. He came clean. If you read Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 you will see his heart of repentance. When he sinned he ran back to God wholeheartedly. But not Solomon.

Verses 5 through 8 describe how Solomon “went after” other gods and goddesses, imitating the abominations of the surrounding nations. Their worship involved sexual rituals and even child sacrifice. To use Jesus’ words in Luke 9:25, he “gained the whole world but forfeited his very soul.”

Solomon’s experience reminds us that **Our wisdom and foolishness are matters of the heart**. If you become wise and stay wise for a lifetime, it’s because your heart is wholly true to the Lord; if you abandon wisdom and end up foolish, it’s because your heart is **not** wholly true to the Lord. That is why the book of Proverbs mentions the human heart 74 times (the term is found 97x). That’s because the heart is the command and control center of our lives; we live from the heart.

One of the most important instructions in Proverbs about the human heart for our topic this morning is found in Proverbs 4:23. This verse explains how we can keep from ending up like Solomon.

23 Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.

“Keep” can also be translated “watch over” or “guard.” We should be vigilant in watching over our hearts because everything we do flows from our hearts - thoughts, words, and actions. If our hearts become poisoned, our whole life will be affected.

When you get the chance, read the verses before and after this one. Proverbs 4:20-27 has been called “The Anatomy of Discipleship” because it speaks about how the parts of our body promote either wisdom or foolishness; what we do with our eyes, ears, mouth, and feet determine whether our hearts are full of wisdom or full of foolishness.

I love that we’re celebrating the Lord’s Table this morning as we talk about becoming wise and staying wise for a lifetime. If you’re like me, sometimes you might doubt whether or not you’ve got what it takes to remain wise for the rest of your life. If Solomon couldn’t stay wise what chance do we have?

The Lord’s Table reminds us that we have advantages that Solomon didn’t. Living after the death and resurrection of Christ, we are able to enter into a covenant with God that

promises things to us that weren't promised to him. In Jeremiah 32:38–40 God made a series of statements about the new covenant.

38 And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 39 I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.

So there is great blessing in fearing the Lord. He continues:

40 I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. *And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.*

If you become aware of your own sinfulness and. . . and you become confident that Jesus died for your sin, you are now bound to God for eternity. God's commitment to you in the new covenant is the only thing that can make us confident about becoming wise and staying wise for a lifetime.

We aren't trusting in our willpower or resolve to keep walking in the fear the Lord and maintaining a heart that is fully God's. We are trusting in God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the indwelling Holy Spirit to keep us fearing him in our hearts and to keep us from turning away from him. We certainly aren't passive in the process, but his commitment to us in the new covenant is our confidence.

Let the bread and the cup remind you of Jesus' great sacrifice for you and God's commitment to keep you on the path of wisdom.