

“The War Within”
1 Kings 3:1-15
January 22, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

After reporting that Solomon’s reign was firmly established (2:46), the author of Kings begins to describe the nature of his reign. Readers often skip to the famous section about Solomon’s request for wisdom and God’s giving of this wisdom. But that is not how the author begins his account of Solomon’s reign. He starts by reporting on Solomon’s dark side, his taking of an Egyptian wife and his worship of God in the high places. Why does he point out these sins of Solomon right at the beginning of his description of Solomon’s reign? He does so to highlight the war going on within Solomon and within the kingdom itself, a war between good and evil, dark and light. By the conclusion of the account of Solomon’s reign, it becomes evident that evil would win in his life. He entered into marriages with women who did not worship Israel’s God, and his wives drew his heart away from the Lord. By the conclusion of 2 Kings, it also becomes evident that evil would win in all Israel’s kings, resulting in God’s judgment upon the nation in the form of conquest by a foreign nation, followed by exile.

We have the same war going on within us. Our evil side is our sin nature that is filled with self-reliance, while our good side trusts in God. Like Solomon in this chapter, we ask of God and receive from him when our good side prevails. The unanswered question of this chapter is which side will prevail with us. Let’s seek to understand these things better by looking at the bad and good side of Solomon.

I. Solomon’s Bad Side

The opening sentence of chapter 3 is wrong on multiple counts. **“Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt.”** The first thing wrong with this is that Solomon was marrying a woman who was not part of the covenant community of God’s people. Israel had been explicitly warned in Deuteronomy not to intermarry with the Canaanites, not because the Bible is against racially mixed marriages, but because of the spiritual dangers of marrying an unbeliever. In the words of Moses, **“You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods”** (Deut. 7:3-4). Solomon later suffered the consequences of not heeding this warning. We read later in 1 Kings these words: **“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”** (11:4).

This was also wrong because it was an early step in Solomon's pattern of accumulating wives. Again, Moses had explicitly warned Israel's kings against the practice of accumulating a large number of wives, saying **"He shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away"** (Deut. 17:17). Though Moses is a little vague about how many is "many," no one could make the case that Solomon had not violated this warning. Though it is difficult just to imagine it, we read that Solomon had 700 wives (1 Kings 11:3). How could he even remember the names of 700 wives? How could he afford 700 wives?

There is still more to what was wrong with Solomon's actions of taking this Egyptian wife. As the verse says, this marriage represented an alliance with Egypt. Again, this was something Israel had been warned about (Deut. 17:16). It was wrong because Israel was to trust in the Lord. He was their helper and defender, not Egypt. It's not hard to imagine the temptation for Solomon of making this alliance. Egypt had long been a powerful nation in this part of the world. It was flattering even to think that Egypt would want to make such an alliance, representing Israel's arrival on the stage as a major player in the politics of this region.

Verses 2-3 add to this portrayal of Solomon's bad side. This is the first time we read of something that will appear repeatedly in these books of 1 and 2 Kings, the high places. **"The people were sacrificing at the high places,"** and Solomon also did so (v. 3). What were these high places? They were simply elevated places that had been used historically for the worship of the Canaanite gods through sacrifices. It is likely that at this period of time Israel was not worshipping the Canaanite gods at these high places, though they would later do so. What was happening was the worship of Jehovah at these places through the offering of sacrifices. What was wrong with that practice? It is simply that God had decreed that there was only one place of sacrifice and that was the tabernacle, or later the temple Solomon would build. The central piece of the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant, and we read in verse 15 of our chapter that it was located in Jerusalem.

Perhaps there's also an intended, though subtle, criticism of Solomon in these opening verses regarding the priority he gave for the building of the temple versus the building of his own palace. The building of his own house is mentioned before the building of the temple, and we are told that the reason Israel sacrificed at the high places was the lack of a temple in Jerusalem. In any case, the author of our book makes it clear later that Solomon spent twice as much time building his own house as he did in building the house of the Lord, the temple (6:38-7:1). And it is also clear from this same text that he began work on his own house long before he began work on the temple.

II. Solomon's Good Side

A list of Solomon's sins doesn't tell the whole story, or even the best story. The vast majority of this chapter, and the majority of the material about Solomon, tells the story of God's grace at work in his life. That work begins with God appearing to Solomon. God always initiates the good within any of us, and he initiates it with Solomon when he appears to him in a dream and says, **"Ask what I shall give you"** (3:5). Our God is a giving God, approaching us not with what we can do for him, but with what he can do for us. He wants to bring good to Solomon's life, even though Solomon had been focused on trusting Egypt, accumulating wives and worshiping God in a way convenient to him.

This whole chapter reminds me of the opening invitation of James in his letter. **"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him"** (James 1:5). I love those words, "without reproach," or as another translation has it, "without finding fault." God gives generously without finding fault. He does so even though he sees our faults completely and with perfect clarity. How unlike me God is. The better I see the faults of others, the less I want to give of myself to them. Thankfully, God is unlike me in this regard. Though he sees Solomon's faults, he comes to him with this generous invitation.

We see Solomon's good side in his response to God's generous offer. I note two things about his response. First, he was humble, approaching God not based on his merits but upon his need. **"I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in"** (v. 7). Some people think, "I can't pray and ask God for anything because I'm not good enough." You are right. You're not good enough. But Jesus is, and that's why we come and ask God in Jesus' name. To refrain from asking because you're not good enough is not humility—it is unbelief. To ask even though we know we're not good enough, but ask anyway because we trust in Jesus, is the essence of faith in the gospel.

We also see the good side of Solomon in what he asks for. **"Give your servant ... 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"** (v. 9)? He asked for wisdom that he might serve others well. God commends him for this request, noting how he didn't ask for riches or for success in fighting his enemies, two things important to kings. Most kings want peace and prosperity, not for the sake of others, but for their own sake. Solomon wanted the gift of wisdom for the sake of others. He was wise even before he asked for wisdom. He had already discerned something about the difference between what is good and bad. He knew that wisdom was better than riches and success. If you have riches and success without wisdom, the riches and success will destroy you. If you have wisdom, then you are happy to let God decide how much money and success to give you. And you are content with whatever he decides. Some people read this passage and think, "O now I

see. If I want riches, I need to ask God for wisdom, and then he will give me both wisdom and riches.” No, that only indicates that what you really want is not wisdom, but riches and success, and you’re just trying to manipulate God to give you these things.

Let’s move toward an application. The word “ask” appears five times in these fifteen verses, and the word “give” another five times. We ask and God gives. So the application is simple. Do you believe this and is it reflected in your actions? Do you ask from God? Someone might respond, “But God has never come to me and said, ‘Ask what I shall give you.’ And besides that, I’m not a king like Solomon.” Actually, you’re wrong on both counts. Let me remind you what Jesus says to you. **“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you”** (Matt. 7:7). And let me remind you of what Peter wrote about all Christians, calling us a **“royal priesthood”** (1 Peter 2:9). You are royalty. Your domain may not be as large as Solomon’s, but you have a domain to rule, a sphere of influence. And you will need wisdom and discernment from God if you are to rule well. Your sphere may be quite small, but it is not unimportant. You have no control over the size of your domain, but you do have control over the wisdom you use in ruling your domain. Ask God for this wisdom and rule for his glory.

The final story of the chapter is an example of Solomon’s wisdom. It is easily the most famous story of his life. Two prostitutes come to him, each claiming to be the mother of a living son and claiming the other was the mother of a deceased son, killed when the mother accidentally smothered him in bed. The kings of Israel would get only the hardest cases, and it is easy to see how this one came to Solomon as a difficult case. It is a classic case of one person’s word against another’s. There were no witnesses to be questioned and no other evidence. How could this case possibly be decided? Solomon lets the women themselves decide by devising a test that would reveal the true mother. He announces his judgment on the matter by ordering a sword to be brought to him. He says that his judgment will be to cut the baby in two and give half to each mother. Such a judgment causes the true mother to give up her rights for the sake of her son. That’s what true mothers do. Her selfless act has revealed her to be the true mother.

Have you ever been stuck like Solomon was here? You have something before you and you don’t know what to do. You need wisdom from God. What do you do? What we often do amounts to the bad Solomon making an alliance with Egypt. We trust ourselves and look within to solve the problem. What we should do instead is what the good Solomon does. Stop and ask God for wisdom. It pleases the Lord when we do so. You’re facing a parenting issue and don’t know what to do. Stop and ask God for wisdom. He will help you. You’re stuck in preparing to lead a Bible study or teach a Sunday School lesson, or in solving some problem at work. Stop and ask for wisdom. It is such a simple

thing, but such a frequently neglected practice. Remember what James said: “If anyone lacks wisdom...” Ask God.

Something I said last week bears repeating here. We need to hear these words not as a reprimand but as an invitation. God is not fussing at us about our prayerlessness in failing to ask of him. Rather, he is inviting us to come to him because he loves us and he loves to be near us and give us truly good gifts. How do we know that? Verse 15 gives us the answer. When Solomon awoke from his dream, **“he came to Jerusalem and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings.”** He did this in the way prescribed by God, through the tabernacle which points forward to the sacrifice of Jesus. God accepts us now because of Jesus’ sacrifice. As a result, he now invites us to pray rather than scolding us into prayer.

CONCLUSION:

There was a war going on within Solomon’s heart, between the good Solomon and the bad Solomon. More accurately, it was a war between the sinful nature and the Spirit. Our Confession speaks of this war, saying that since there are remnants of corruption remaining within all of us, there is “a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (XIII:2). This is no game. We may speak of an athletic contest as warfare, but it really isn’t. In a war, the object is the death and destruction of the enemy. We must fight or we will die. We are to live in peace with sinners, but no Christian should live in peace with even a little sin. We fight it as this passage illustrated to us. We humbly confess our weakness and simply call out to our Father, believing that he is for us in Christ.