

“Solomon: Comedy or Tragedy?”
1 Kings 4-5
February 5, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

These next chapters in the story of King Solomon contain a clear description of the blessings of God upon Solomon and the nation he rules. God had given him wisdom, and he uses that wisdom to bring peace and prosperity to the whole nation. If you could take a time machine to go back to Israel at some point of your choosing during its 2000 year history in the Old Testament, this is the time you would want to choose. The author summarizes their national life by saying, “Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy... And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree” (4:20, 25). If you were reading this story for the first time and you didn’t know how it turned out, the question on your mind would be about the durability of this prosperity. Would it endure or would it be the peak with everything going downhill from here? That is the ultimate question of whether Solomon’s story is a Greek tragedy or comedy.

Are you familiar with these classifications of Greek plays? The tragedy is the story that starts well but ends poorly. Think of the letter U turned upside down. When a situation reaches its peak, things quickly begin to take a downturn until it ends tragically. The comedy is just the opposite, represented by the letter U. A situation is challenging and things go from bad to worse. But just when it seems that it can’t get any worse, something happens and it is all reversed. Whether Israel was living a tragedy or comedy at this time is merely a matter of historical interest for us. But it is much more than that when we apply it to our personal lives. Are you living a tragedy or a comedy? Have you peaked already, so that you can expect things to go downhill from here? Or is the best still to come? Is your view of the future one of despair or one of hope? It depends on whether you think your story is a tragedy or comedy.

There’s something very sad about someone who peaks early and whose life always looks back to a moment of past glory. We had a dog like that once. She was a victim of some early success in squirrel hunting. As a puppy, she spent a good bit of time barking at squirrels frolicking in the trees above her. One day, a squirrel fell from the tree and she pounced on it. It would be the only squirrel she ever caught in her life. But that didn’t stop her from trying. For the rest of her life she would bark at the squirrels, bite the trees on which the squirrels were climbing, and generally expend a great deal of energy in the process.

Let’s look at these issues in Solomon’s story, paying special attention to what we learn about living with hope for a bright future.

I. The Case for Comedy

If we take a snapshot of life in Israel during this early part of the reign of Solomon, it is clear by every standard that Israel was experiencing a time of strength. The reason is clear. Solomon had asked for wisdom in order to rule these people well, and God had answered his prayer. The nation was strong because their king was strong. Let's notice some of the ways the author highlights Israel's prosperity.

The first part of chapter 4 shows the administrative wisdom of Solomon, wisdom which led to the summary of verse 20. The connection between the first 19 verses and verse 20 is obscured by the decision of our translators to begin a new section with verse 20. I think it is better to read verse 20 as the conclusion of the first part of the chapter, an opinion that is supported by the fact that the Hebrew Bible begins a new chapter with verse 21. The point is to draw the connection between Israel's prosperity and Solomon's administrative abilities. Those administrative abilities were focused on his decisions about the people to appoint to administer various parts of the kingdom. A wise administrator is able to recognize the gifts of others, put them in places where they can succeed, and then give up power to them. That is the focus of all these names mentioned in the opening verses of chapter 4, together with the positions they occupied.

This brings up an important application. In my experience, the gift of administration is often undervalued in our society, and even in the church. David was a great military leader, but the nation's prosperity would peak only under a great administrative leader like Solomon. Good administrators are easily unappreciated for the simple reason that good ones cause others to look good. So the application is this. If you have the gift of administration, use it. We need it. If you don't have the gift of administration, recognize its value in those who do have it by affirming them.

The next section, beginning in 4:21, speaks of Israel's relationship with its traditional enemies. Solomon ruled over these kings, who paid tribute to Israel. The result of this was both peace and prosperity. There was peace because they weren't attacking Israel. There was prosperity because they were paying taxes in support of Israel's national projects, lessening the tax burden on Israelites.

The prosperity of the nation is also seen in the abundance of provisions for Solomon. In describing the daily provision for him, the point is that Solomon was able to provide for a large number of people, who then in turn serve the nation's political needs. Even Israel's animals are not left out of this picture, also being well-supplied.

Chapter four concludes with a summary of Solomon's wisdom. It was unsurpassed by everyone else, not just in Israel but throughout the world. The author names several people unknown to us but apparently famous in this day for their wisdom, only to say that Solomon's wisdom exceeded theirs. He spoke 3000 proverbs, far more than we have in our Old Testament book of Proverbs, and over 1000 songs. It was an attractive wisdom, drawing people from all nations who would come just to hear him speak. The nations were giving tribute to Solomon, but not in a way that made them hate him. Instead, they were drawn to him.

But we still haven't made our case for this being a comedy. If you were reading this account for the first time, not knowing how it turned out, what reason would you have for ending the story with a "and they lived happily ever after"? It would be the fact that the author seems to be deliberately listing the things that are in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. God had told Abraham that he would multiply his offspring "**as the sand that is on the seashore**" (Gen. 22:17), and now under Solomon we read that "**Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea**" (4:20). In Genesis 15:18-19, God specifically promises Abraham all the land between Egypt and the Euphrates River, the same language used in 5:21. And God told Abraham that his offspring would come out of Egypt with great possessions, and now all the surrounding nations are bringing their wealth to Israel. So 1 Kings 4 is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. It's taken over one-thousand years, but God is always faithful. So we might expect our story to conclude now with a "and they lived happily ever after."

II. The Case for Tragedy

Do you remember that feeling you had as a child the first day you woke up on your summer break from school and you were looking forward to two and a half months of summer vacation? Contrast that with the way you felt when you woke up on the last day of summer vacation and faced the prospect of school starting the next day. Both days are still vacation days, but the attitude is completely different. At the beginning of summer, two and a half months seems like almost forever to a child, with the result that there is an attitude of joyful anticipation. But the last day signals the end of summer delights and carefree days. That's the difference between comedy and tragedy. Things are going well for Israel now, but will it continue?

Even in the midst of this glowing account of the peace and prosperity of Israel during the early part of Solomon's reign, the author drops some hints that not all is right. The first hint is the simple report of verse 26: "**Solomon also had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots, and 12,000 horsemen.**" Why would this be a problem? It is a problem because of something said in Deuteronomy 17. God's law there states that Israel's kings "**must not acquire**

many horses” for themselves (Deut. 17:16). Why would the acquisition of horses be a problem in God’s eyes? It is because horses were used largely in military applications, particularly for the pulling of chariots. This is God’s way of pointing out how Israel’s kings are to trust the Lord instead of military might.

Solomon’s accumulation of horses points out something about his sin nature, a flaw that all of us experience. Solomon wanted to get to a place where he didn’t have to trust in the Lord, and he used the gifts God had given him to get himself to that place. He used God’s gifts against God. Don’t we do the same? We long to get to a place where we feel powerful and in control of our lives. We want to be independent, not dependent. So if someone has been given by God a more than average sum of money, the money is used not to need God. If someone is given a strong and healthy body, the health that God has given is used to boast and feel better about oneself. Someone who has the gift of humor or the gift of an attractive appearance uses that gift to feel better about themselves. Someone who has been given well-behaved or gifted children will feel sinfully proud of those children. Like Solomon, we are using the gifts of God against God.

Instead of that, God wants us to be dependent on him. He wants us to have the childlike quality of helplessness which produces in us the same thing it produces in our children. They come to us and ask for help. God wants us to do the same. He wanted Solomon not to answer the threat of enemy attack by automatically resorting to his army of horse-drawn chariots, but to automatically go to prayer. Solomon’s reluctance to trust God in this way becomes a crack in the foundation of the nation, a crack that will widen over the centuries and lead to the catastrophic failure of the nation.

There is another hint of trouble in our text. Chapter 5 recounts Solomon’s preparations for the building of the temple, the construction and dedication of which spans the next several chapters. Part of his preparations included the drafting of forced labor to do the work. We read in verse 14 that 10,000 workers would be sent to Lebanon to help harvest the timber required for the house of the Lord. It then says that **“They would be a month in Lebanon and two months at home.”** The phrase “at home” is literally “his house.” Our translators interpret this to refer to the house of the laborers, and thus they translate it “at home.” But it could also refer, and I think probably does, to Solomon’s house. The author makes a big deal out of the fact that Solomon spent twice as long building his house as he did the house of the Lord. And it looks now like he used this conscripted labor to work on his house as well as the house of the Lord, requiring them to spend twice as much time on his house as on the Lord’s house.

III. The Ultimate Comedy

So is this story a tragedy after all? Remember that the tragedy follows the pattern of the upside down U. That is clearly the pattern of 1 and 2 Kings. But it is also not the end of the story. The comedy usually runs through loss and trouble, but at the bottom when things seem to be at their worst, there is a turnaround and victory is snatched from certain defeat. The story of Kings ends in tragedy, but not the story of the Bible. Another King will come, and this one is referred to in the New Testament as one “greater than Solomon” (Matt. 12:42). His wisdom is greater and his kingdom is greater. Solomon built a temple for the glory of God, but this greater king makes the whole earth into a temple, a holy place for the dwelling of God with his people. Solomon trusted in his own power, but the King greater than Solomon gave up power and trusted in his heavenly Father.

Solomon could not sustain a kingdom that would endure because of the cracks in his own life. But Jesus is able to sustain a kingdom that will never perish. It is a kingdom of everlasting joy, a banquet in which everyone present will eat and drink and be happy.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with two applications. First, be filled with hope. Because of Jesus, you can live a comedy instead of a tragedy. Because Jesus is King, the best is ahead of you, not behind you. Never again will there be that sense of dread the reader gets in reading this passage, a dread that comes from knowing that the peace and prosperity will be short-lived. Your life is like the first day of summer vacation, not the last.

The second application is to surrender the story you are writing for your life and submit instead to the story Jesus is writing. If you hold on to the story you want to write of your life, it will end in tragedy. But if you submit to Jesus’ story, it will end well because Jesus is the truly wise one who knows how to lead your life. Another word for submission to Jesus’ story is the word “faith.” You trust the wisdom and goodness of Jesus, the one greater than Solomon.